THE UNIVERSITY OF HULL

MIGRANTS AND MODERNISATION - A STUDY OF CHANGE IN LAO SOCIETY

by

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being a thesis submitted for the Degree of
Doctor of Philosophy in the Department of Sociology and
Social Anthropology in the University of Hull

May 1979

ABSTRACT

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This thesis focusses on the interaction between rural-to-urban migration on the one hand, and 'modernisation' on the other, in the fields of economic, political and social relations in Lao society.

The introduction presents the concepts and research methods used and the design of the thesis. It emphasises the aim of the work, to describe, through history, aspects of the development of various economic political and social relations in rural and urban Laos. In this context particular emphasis is given to the relationship between ideologies, expectations and practice. Myth and ritual are seen as areas of communication which legitimise an institutionalised order of inequality.

Following a general historical and geographical background (Chapte 2), a critical review of the existing literature on Lao society (Chapter 3) and an introduction to the two research villages, one rural and one urban (Chapter 4), the next three chapters form the core of the thesis, offering a detailed analysis of, successively, economic, political and social relations within the rural and urban villages under the influence of modernisation.

The section on the rural economy describes its historical development and analyses the influence of traditional ideologies on modern economic practice. The section on the urban economy shows how the economies of modern Lao towns developed as a result of factors external to Laos itself, while individual participants still maintain contact wi the rural economic sector.

In the study of political relations (Chapter 6) the importance of competing ideologies and the complexity of the relationship between ideals and practice become most clearly evident. The close link between town, state and monarchy on the one hand, is contrasted with the political ideology of the village which grows out of the villagers' primary concern to define and control their relationships with natural forces. The study of rural and urban social relations (Chapter 7) shows, through examples of a few key social activities, how the influence of modern practice has affected the development of social ideals, as well as behaviour.

The concluding chapter brings together the analysis regarding the interrelationship between migration and modernisation, and shows how the traditional economic and social constraints governing 'appropriate' and prestige-giving redistribution of 'wealth', which had emphasised the principle of cooperation, have given way under the influence of 'modernisation' to economic motivations which emphasise competition. In modern Laos the ways in which people talk or think about their society derive to an important degree from a corpus of traditional ideology based on ritual communications. The ways in which they act within their society however, change in response to imported influences.

PREFACE AND ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

> "I feel delighted at the prospect of living in this exquisite spot with such an incomparable view before me".

Thus Auguste Pavie in 1887 recorded his first impressions of Luang Prabang. Eighty-one years later, in 1968, my own feelings were no different. Luang Prabang is a city whose surface beauty is only the outward evidence of an inner charm which has captivated numerous visitors. That charm, though present throughout Laos, is most obvious in the glorious setting of Luang Prabang itself, and has led many a writer to abandon his scientific training and wax lyrical about the magical smiles of Lao village girls, the benign wisdom on the gnarled faces of old men and the breathtaking beauty of the scenery.

Whatever one may say about the validity of such impressions, it was the charm of the Lao people and their country which prompted me to prolong a one-year teaching contract into an association with the country which will have lasted nearly eleven years by the time the final words of this thesis are typed. Of those years I have spent six and a half in Laos itself, one in Thailand and three and a half in England studying and writing about the Lao. This thesis is therefore to me a great deal more than an academic exercise, although it is inevitably that as well. It is an attempt to place on record some of the experience and insights that I have gained in a culture that differs greatly from my own, a culture which has been bombarded with new ideas, concepts, materials and techniques during the period in which I have known it. In addition to the phenomenally rapid cultural and economic transformation to which many parts of Lao society were subjected during this period, there was behind it all the ever-present spectre of a protracted and bitter war, which gradually pushed the Lao people further and further apart, creating

divisions which peace alone would not heal. In this disturbing and tragic climate any sympathetic outsider naturally found himself personally involved in family crises and individual tragedies, though it was amazing for how long one might live under the illusion that the Lao were all happy, carefree people with no thought but their love of life.

Living in Laos has certainly affected the development of my own personality and outlook on life. While an anthropologist must present what he has studied in terms comprehensible to readers who may have no previous knowledge of the society in question, my experience in Laos will clearly have influenced the way in which I describe and analyse its society. I cannot therefore pretend to be the independent and impartial observer that the scientist would claim as his ideal.

It is as well, however, to finish with the personal reminiscences in a Preface such as this. I do not mean I shall try to disguise my own involvement in episodes recounted in the text. On the contrary the presence of the anthropologist must often be crucial to the way scenes develop and conversations turn, and I shall distinguish carefully between those events which I witnessed and those which other people told me about. I shall not, however, use examples in which I personally played a crucial role, preferring to leave such stories until publishers clamour for my autobiography!

Meanwhile the lives of many of my friends and informants in Laos have been radically altered since the years in 1972-74 during which they helped me to collect my research data. The Kingdom of Laos has become the Lao People's Democratic Republic. The towns, stripped of their economic support from overseas, have emptied much of their population back into the countryside. High officials of the Kingdom have been sent

to remote provinces for "re-education" in the ways of the Republic. Large numbers of urban dwellers have preferred to become refugees in Thailand, France or the United States rather than adapt their life-style to the exigencies of a new regime. One of the consequences is that communication between people who worked together three years ago is now often impossible. I have therefore been unable to discover whether those who gave me so much help in Laos would now wish that help to be publicly acknowledged. I have therefore decided that to name individually any of those who helped me at any time in Laos itself would be invidious.

For six and a half years I received advice, assistance, information and friendship from countless people of many nationalities, but above all Lao. I hope that they will understand my reasons for not mentioning them by name and accept this general acknowledgement of my indebtedness. Few of those people will read this thesis, but I hope that those who do will find something in it to interest, amuse, stimulate or even infuriate them! This thesis is offered to the people of Laos, but above all to the victims of the war and of culture shock: the displaced, the uprooted, the refugees and those who have simply found it very difficult to cope with so much change in such a short space of time.

My acknowledgements in Britain are principally to three bodies for vital and much appreciated financial support: the Social Science Research Council (1970-71), the University of Hull (1971-74, though particularly 1971-72) and the Leverhulme Trust, who generously funded my fieldwork from 1972 to 1974. I should also like to thank Voluntary Service Overseas (VSO) for sending me to Laos in the first place in 1968.

At a personal level, the late Professor M.A. Jaspan provided me with the start without which there could have been no continuation, and my

supervisor, Lewis Hill, has throughout followed my ponderous progress with wise advice, invaluable criticism and kindly support. He has been particularly generous with his time in the months of final revision, during which I have been resident in Thailand.

I have received help and encouragement from many other members of the staff and students of the Centre for South-East Asian Studies and the Department of Sociology and Social Anthropology at the University of Hull, among whom Victor King and Paul Lightfoot made particularly valuable comments on my first draft. I have also received advice and assistance from several members of the School of Oriental and African Studies in London. In Paris, the European centre for studies of Laos, I have received most precious guidance from Professor Georges Condominas and the staff of his Centre pour la Documentation et Recherche sur l'Asie du Sud-Est et le Monde Insulindien (CEDRASEMI). Amphay (Pierre Sylvain) Dore has, over ten years, been my constant guide to the intricacies of Lao society.

I am most grateful also to my current employer, the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees, for allowing me a year's leave of absence in which to finish the writing of this thesis.

The maps were drawn by Keith Scurr, of the Department of Geography, University of Hull, and the thesis typed by Pat Wilkinson. I am most grateful to both of them, and the quality of their work is evident to any reader.

Little has been written about the people of Laos, a people who have sat at the crossroads of civilisations for centuries, imbibing from the great cultures of India and China as well as from indigenous traditions whose origins we can only guess at. What follows is a 'thesis' in the true Hegelian sense. It is an attempt to put forward an analysis and

explanation of a remarkable culture as it was observed at a particular moment. I trust that other observers will wish to propose 'antitheses' to many of my points. If they do, perhaps eventually a 'synthesis' can be moulded which will do justice to the intricate beauties of a way of life that has kept me enthralled since I first came into contact with it.

Bangkok, March 1979

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NOTE ON THE TRANSCRIPTION OF LAO WORDS

The transcription of Lao characters into Roman poses particular problems, and no satisfactory solution to them has so far been proposed, nor is any one system of transcription anywhere near to achieving general acceptance. In fact there are so many systems in use that the editor of a recent publication bringing together ten of Charles Archaimbault's most important articles on Laos in a photo offset edition had to apologise for the fact that several systems of transcription would be encountered in articles by a single writer.[1]

The basic problems are (a) the notation of sounds with no equivalent in European languages, (b) the notation of tonal distinctions, (c) the notation of long and short vowels.

Any decision is bound to be an unsatisfactory compromise, but I have decided to base my transcription on a system relatively well known to scholars of the region, the General System of Transcription, as laid down for the Thai language by the Thai Royal Institute in the Journal of the Siam Society in 1941,[2] with a few minor adaptations.

For ease of typing, I use a ¯ over the vowel to indicate a long vowel, rather than a ^{u} to distinguish a short one. Some writers prefer to double vowels to indicate length, but with Lao this creates problems in the transcription of several important diphthongs which can occur with both long and short values (a number of other diphthongs have only one value).

I have added a consonant ny to indicate an initial consonant as in English 'new' (which does not occur in Thai).

The system ignores the question of tones, and it is not possible to

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1. Archaimbault, Ch. (1973) i.

2. ~~Thai Royal~~ Institute, 1941:49-53.

reconstruct therefore the original Lao word on the basis of this transcription. For those wishing to do so, the Glossary at the back (p. 434) gives the actual Lao script for all words used in the text.

Where words (particularly names) are widely known in another transcription, that spelling will normally be used, although without underlining, e.g. Vientiane (viang chan). Words are normally only underlined on the first occasion that they appear.

The following is a brief summary of the system:

A. Vowels

Vowels are based on Italian vowels except that:

ae - sound of ea in English 'bear'
ǫ - sound of o in English 'shot'
oe - sound of eu in French 'peuple'
u' - sound more open than German ü

(Notes: ae and oe are not diphthongs. All other juxtaposed vowels are. u as in English 'book'. ū as in English 'boom'
e as in English 'bed'. ā as in English 'bar'. ō as in English 'bone')

B. Consonants

Consonants are as in English except that:

Initial k, p and t are unaspirated as in French

Final k, p and t are unexplosive and unaspirated

kh - k aspirated

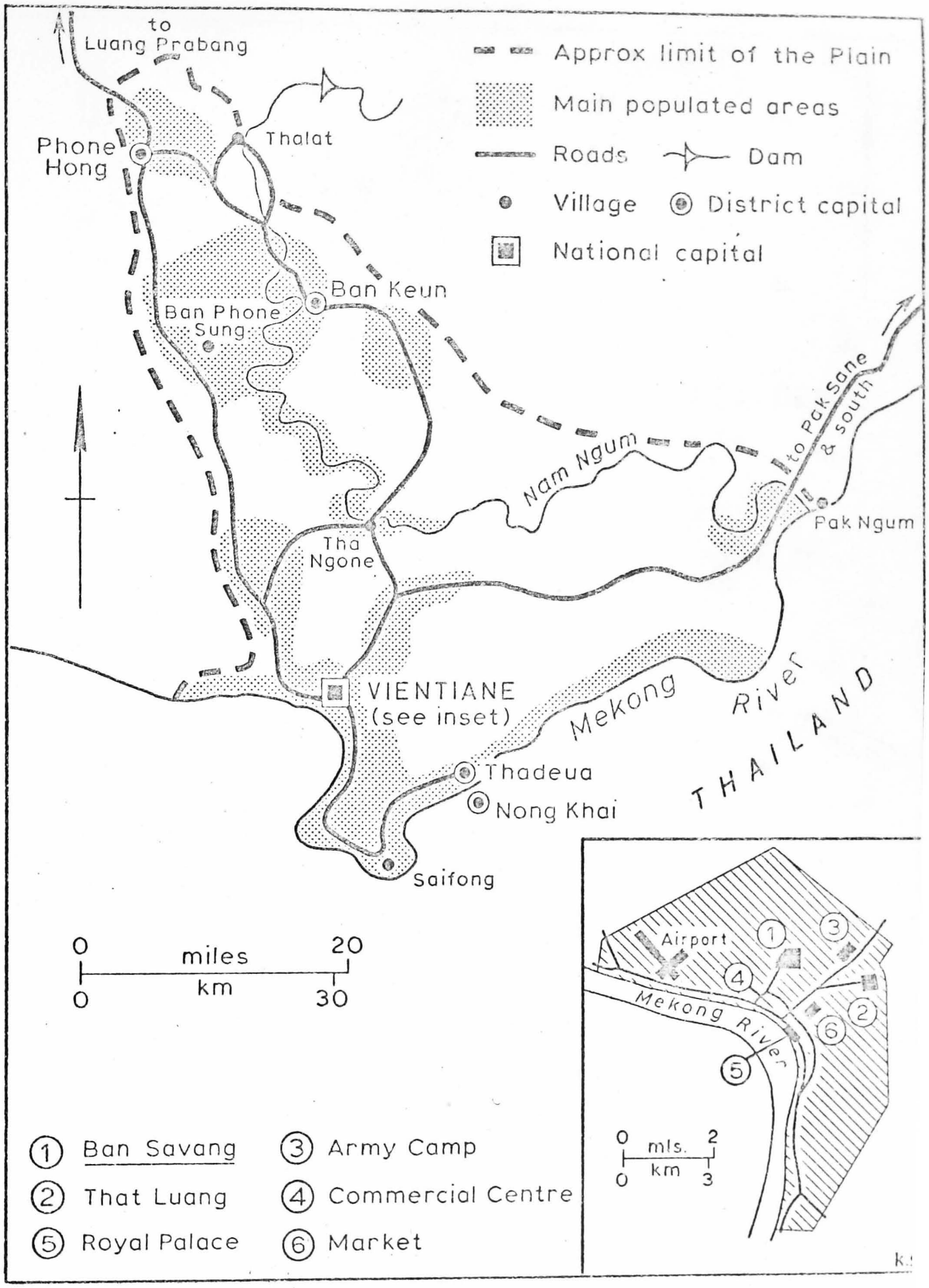
ph - p aspirated (not English ph)

th - t aspirated (not English th)

ng - as in English 'singer' not as in 'linger'

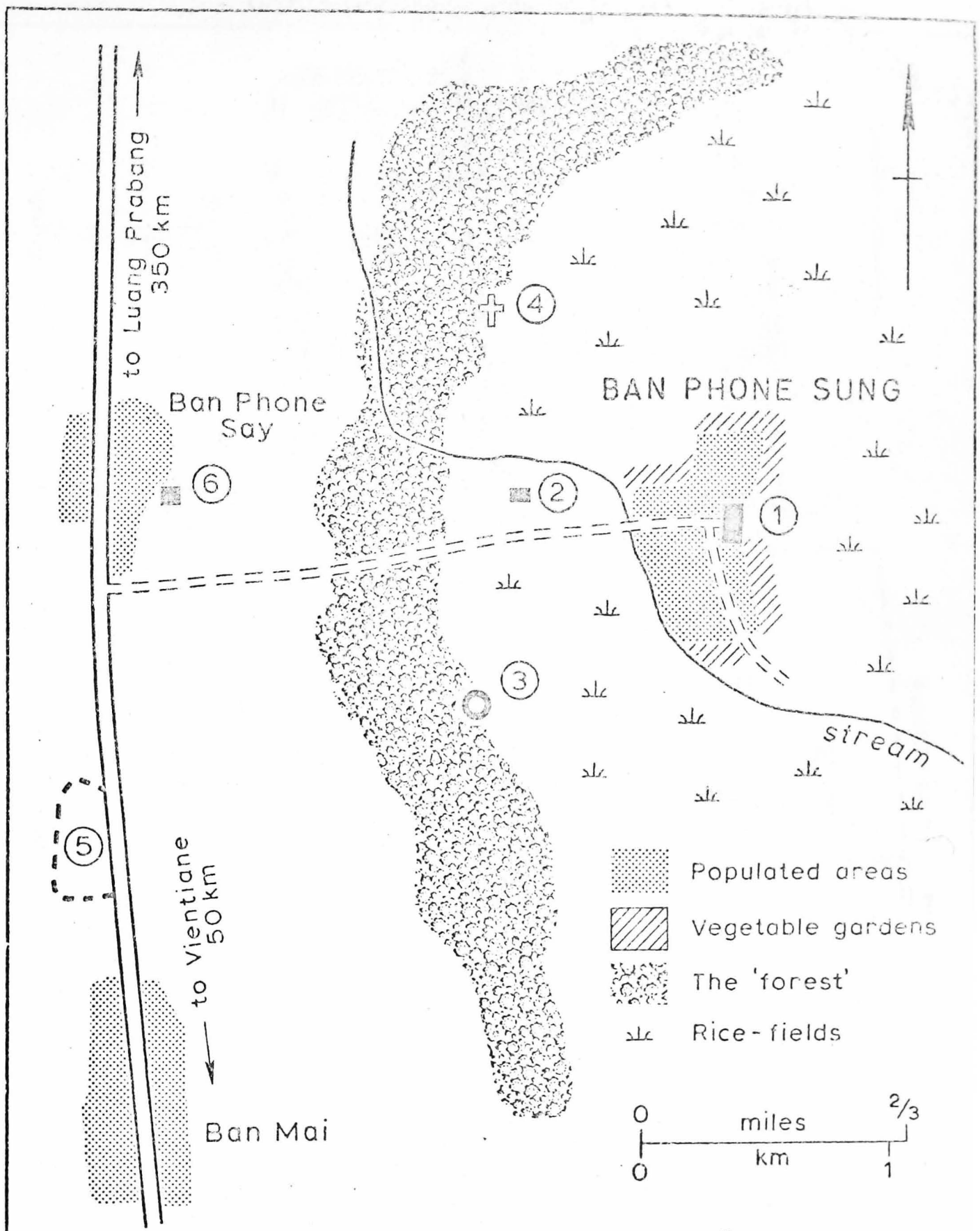


Map 1 Laos (1972)

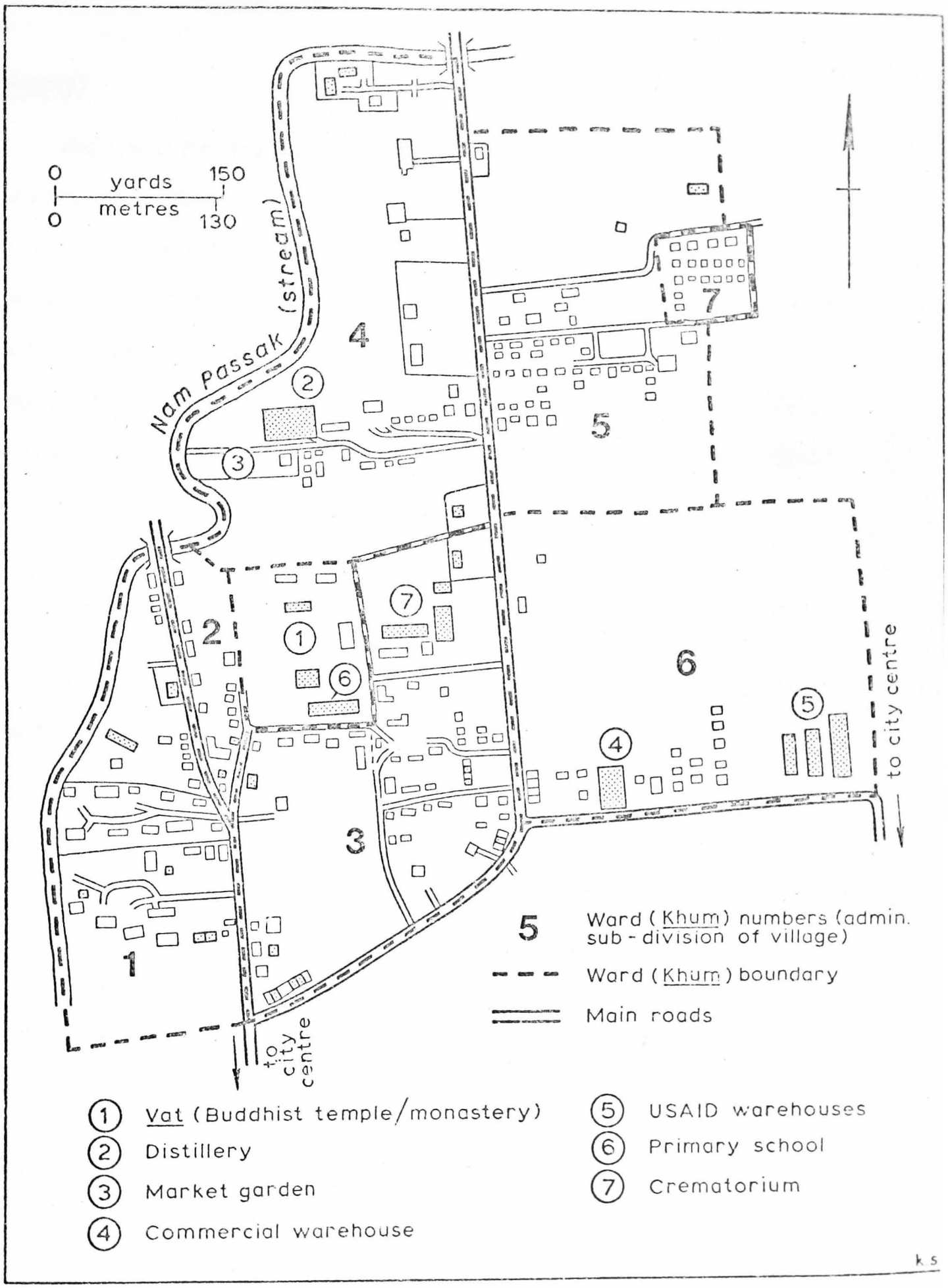


Map 2 The Vientiane Plain

Map 3 (inset) The City of Vientiane



Map 4 Ban Phon Sung



Map 5 Ban Savang

CHAPTER ONE INTRODUCTORY REMARKS

General

Many anthropologists, having learned their craft at university, search for a place in the world where they can conveniently undertake research. In my case, having come to know another country and its people, I looked about for a means of understanding them more deeply and of communicating that understanding to others. Social anthropology seemed to be the ideal tool. So, where some anthropologists see their research primarily as a contribution to the study of Man in his social and natural surroundings, my perspective is rather that of using the tools forged by students of human society to throw light on the way of life of a particular group of people.

If social anthropology as a discipline had one drawback for me in this aim, it was that its practitioners did not seem to be agreed as to the most efficient and truthful methods of analysing human society. Indeed it seemed that many were more concerned with how to forge their tools than with what might be constructed with them. This is perhaps not surprising in a discipline so young, but British social anthropologists have been particularly constricted by the way things are organised in this country.

Such are the demands of a university career that many anthropologists have to make do with a single chance to undertake protracted fieldwork. This fieldwork, which may only last one year, must provide the young scientist not only with a body of ethnographic materials which he can reveal in books and articles, but it must also provide the illustrations when he contributes to the theoretical basis of his discipline.

If there are those who despair that despite the long efforts of brilliant men, the basic principles of social anthropology have still not been agreed, I would respectfully suggest that this situation may be laid at the door of too much thought and not enough field research. If a chemist, after one year of furious activity in the laboratory, then spent the rest of his life analysing the notes he had made during that year, we should not be surprised if he was found to be persisting in errors which a simple control experiment would have detected. The anthropologist is frequently tormented by the impossibility of repeating the observations he made during his fieldwork, either because he can no longer visit the area or because circumstances there have so changed in the meantime that repetition or reconstruction of the events is impossible.

I feel obliged to make these points at the beginning of this thesis, since they represent an important aspect of my ambivalent relationship with the discipline. On the one hand, anthropology has given me the tools with which to achieve insights into the social relationships of the people I have studied. On the other, I am sometimes amazed by the claims anthropologists make, by the way they write about people, by the conclusions they seem able to draw from the most limited evidence. Perhaps I am brought to these ideas by the nature of my own experience. I spent over six years in Laos, of which two years only were in full-time research. Frequently throughout that period I felt I had at last 'understood' the Lao people, only to be visited soon afterwards by nagging doubts as to whether I really understood anything at all. After six years I have concluded that I shall never 'understand' the Lao people any more than one ever totally understands another individual person. I have, however, accumulated a certain amount of knowledge about a number of Lao people whom I

knew, and about how they reacted to the natural and social predicaments with which they were faced over a period of time. I was able to identify patterns in these reactions and to study the reactions which Lao people expressed when discussing the behaviour of themselves or others. I also studied the historical and cultural background to the present-day behaviour and ideas of these people. Part of this accumulated knowledge is presented in this thesis.

Why bother? What is the point of writing all this down and presenting it in this form? The urgency of this question was repeatedly brought home to me by the remarks of British residents or visitors to Laos who, upon learning of my profession, would leave no doubt that they felt it to be scandalous that anybody should be financed by the British taxpayer just to wander about collecting information about Laos and its people, which would be set down in a thesis which nobody would read. So it may be worth looking for a moment at the aims which this work sets out to fulfil.

First, as will become clear in Chapter Three when I discuss the literature at present available on Laos, there is astonishingly little written about a people who have played an important, if subsidiary, role in one of the most devastating conflicts of modern times. Apart from the works of political historians, the student of South-East Asia will find very few books or articles with which to approach the serious study of the Lao people. Secondly, the circumstances through which the Lao passed in the 1960s and early 1970s were so entirely different from those which had pertained in their country before, that it seemed interesting to study their reaction to such an extraordinary combination of events. And thirdly, in spite of what I have said above about my approach to anthropology, there is no doubt that every anthropologist is keen to use his materials to say something about

mankind in general, or at the very least to comment on the theories of others. It is the anthropologist's fervent hope that his insights may help men towards a sympathetic attitude to each other, towards an understanding and appreciation of their cultural peculiarities, and thus towards a lessening of tension and an increase of tolerance among all people.

This thesis is written therefore in the belief that information about a little-known people is intrinsically valuable; that the situation of the Lao people between 1968 and 1975 was particularly interesting in the wider context of human reactions to particular circumstances; and that the study of man's behaviour and ideas is in any circumstances useful and rewarding.

Having explained why it seemed worthwhile to study the Lao people, I should discuss what particular features of their life seemed most worthy of study. In the communities in which I lived in Laos by far the most striking feature was the impact of social, economic and political innovations which, for the most part, had their origins in Western Europe and the United States. These innovations coincided with the rapid movements of population from rural into urban communities. It seemed interesting, therefore, to look most closely at those aspects of modern Lao life which might be subsumed under the heading 'urbanisation', a term which carries for me loose connotations both of the distinction between 'rural' and 'urban' and of that between 'traditional' and 'modern'. The meanings of these vital terms will be analysed in more detail below. In plain language then, I decided to look at the way in which life in the towns differed from life in the villages of Laos, and to see how much either of these ways of life had been influenced by the materials and the ideas which were being brought into the country by people from outside, particularly those from Western Europe

and the United States.

How was this study to be undertaken? In the most general terms there seem to me to be two extreme methods: the one would involve soaking oneself in the atmosphere of the communities to be studied over a long period, identifying with them, living a life intricately linked with theirs, and then in the end writing poems or a novel deriving from the experience. The other extreme would be to arm oneself with a computer, questionnaires, a battery of research assistants and the latest statistical techniques and produce quantified data on everything possible. The anthropologist, in order to do justice to the relations pertaining between groups of human beings, has to find a middle path between these two extremes. Inevitably the choice of data to be recorded, analysed and presented is made in the light of subjective prejudice, scientific training, pure chance and a host of other considerations. The resulting account will be partial, flawed and biassed in one way or another. Recognising these things, the anthropologist has to be circumspect in the claims that he makes for the accuracy of his research methods.

In my own research I employed two basic methods of research: study of Lao society through documents such as written histories, photographs, literature, newspapers, ethnographic reports; and participant observation. During the two years of full-time research I divided my time between two 'villages', one a rural community of 90 households about 50 kilometres north of the capital, Vientiane, the other an urban 'village' of 200 households within the municipality of Vientiane itself. In these two communities I collected data both from formal interviews following a prepared questionnaire and from informal observation and conversations. Analysing data and impressions in terms of what I was

trying to discover has allowed me to come to tentative conclusions about the way that Lao people have reacted in various circumstances.

My aim in this thesis is to paint a picture of a people confronted by rapid change, and to achieve that in as concise, interesting and readable a form as possible. In order to achieve this, the conceptual tools which I shall use in the course of this work need to be clearly defined, and the precise meanings given to each key word or phrase must be understood. Before looking in detail, then, at the ways in which I collected my data and at the design which I have chosen for this work, it is important to explain the language used and my reasons for rejecting some of the vocabularies and grammars used by other writers.

Concepts

The first definitional problem which faces all those writing about the movement from countryside into town is how to define the key words 'rural' and 'urban'. Since Wirth's famous 1938 definition of the city as "a relatively large, dense and permanent settlement of socially heterogeneous individuals",[1] sociologists and urban anthropologists have on the whole accepted that size, density and heterogeneity are indeed significant elements of the way in which 'urban' differs from 'rural'.

What distinction do the Lao themselves, who have a long history of urban settlements, make between rural and urban? Essentially they distinguish between bānnǭk (the village outside) and mū'ang (the town or city). This is of course an urban-centred view, since to consider

1. Wirth (1951) p. 50.

the countryside as 'the village outside' is to assume oneself to be in the town. Even so, it is a view that urbanites have managed to impose on rural-dwellers, who often refer to themselves as 'merely village-outside people'. The distinction between bān (village) and mū'ang (town) is not so clear-cut. Bān can also mean 'house', 'home' or 'a quarter of a town', and mū'ang can refer to the nation as a whole, or to a province, as well as to a town. There is clearly a sense, as will be discussed in Chapter Six, in which mū'ang has political and administrative connotations as well as just the 'urban' idea of size, density and heterogeneity.

Should one therefore use Lao criteria in defining what is an urban area, or some internationally accepted scientific guide-lines? The trouble is that no urban sociologist has yet come up with an internationally applicable definition of 'urban', since what is obviously urban in one culture may be more realistically described as rural in another. The Lao terms, however, are far too imprecise. Mū'ang is used in several ways in popular language and has been given yet other meanings in modern administrative reforms. The best compromise seems to be to call 'urban' those areas which are now designated by the Lao administration as 'cities' or kamphāeng nakhǭn. This limits the numbers to only the five largest towns: Vientiane, Luang Prabang, Thakkek, Savannakhet and Pakse. In 1973 all these towns had over 40,000 inhabitants. No other town, even provincial capitals, had a population of over 10,000.[1] It also satisfactorily solves the problem of how to define the small towns which I shall refer

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1. An exception to this were the refugee centres in the south-west of Xieng Khouang province, which grew to a total population of 132,000 by 1974. There were two main towns, Sam Thong and Long Cheng, with a number of subsidiary centres, in a small area of mountain valleys capable of supporting perhaps 5,000 people from agriculture. The subsistence needs of these people were met directly by different agencies of the U.S. government.

to as 'district centres'. These are the seats of the modern district governors.[1] In some cases these centres have grown up on the sites of existing villages, in others they have been built up from scratch on sites convenient for modern communication. Typically the population might number around 2,000, of whom most would earn part of their livelihood from agriculture, while at the same time one or more members of each family would probably be involved in commerce (market, shops, restaurants, transport), administration (civilian, police, military) or specialised labour (mechanics, metal workers, barbers, drivers). If one were to define 'urban' in terms of the types of activities which people undertake, it might seem right to class these centres as 'urban'. On the whole I feel the temptation should be resisted to equate 'urban' with the transformation of rural life by the introduction of modern technology and specialised production. I shall therefore use 'urban' only when referring to the five main cities of Laos. The 'district centres' will be considered as a fruit of the modernisation of the rural areas, and the smaller provincial capitals as seats of administration insufficiently large or dense to qualify as 'urban'. 'Rural' and 'urban' then refer to precisely defined locations on the map. The urban areas referred to are contained within the administrative boundaries of the five cities. Although these boundaries are so laid down that there are subsistence farmers among the urban residents, this seems nevertheless to be the most convenient definition and corresponds to local administrative practice reflected in official statistics.

This leads into a second question of definition, the ways in which the terms 'traditional' and 'modern' are to be used. In much writing

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1. A district (mū'ang) is a sub-division of a province (khūaeng) (See Chapter Six.).

about South-East Asia the 'modern' period is held to begin with the arrival of Western colonial powers. Thus, Bastin and Benda entitle their work A History of Modern Southeast Asia and write in their preface:

> "What is attempted here is a broad interpretive account of the process of Western colonialism in Southeast Asia, beginning with the arrival of the Portuguese ... and ending with ... the establishment of independent South-east Asian governments after the Second World War".[1]

Scholars concerned with Japan are often even more precise. 'Modern' Japan begins in 1868 with the start of the Meiji period, which saw the opening up of the country to outside influences after centuries of isolationism.[2] Writers who employ such definitions of 'modern' use 'traditional' to indicate features of society which have survived basically unchanged since before the arrival of Western influence.

Such usage is open to two initial criticisms, first that to use 'modern' in this sense is a colonialist viewpoint which does not correspond to any conceived reality in the countries concerned, and secondly that 'modern' is used to mean 'Western'. A further danger in the use of the modern/traditional opposition is that the words acquire connotations of value judgments, specifically in the debate over the 'value' of modern technology, which in its crudest form is the argument between multi-nationals and "small is beautiful". Conversely, 'traditional' may acquire connotations of 'cute but backward', or of 'a precious heritage threatened by monstrous technology', depending on who uses the word. It is customary for anthropologists to be

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1. J. Bastin and H.J. Benda (1968) p. vii.

2. See, for example, Robert J. Smith's "Town and City in Pre-Modern Japan" (1973), which uses 'pre-modern' to refer to the Tokugawa period, 1615-1868.

favourably disposed to 'traditional' things, while development economists tend to be against them. Finally, it is clear that 'traditional' has connotations of cultural specificity, while 'modern' gives the idea of something anonymous and international.

Of all these features the main barrier to a rational use of the word 'modern' is in its associations with 'Western'. Careful and consistent usage can avoid the danger of value judgments being ascribed, and the problem of cultural specificity hardly arises in the study of a single culture. What must be made clear is that modern cannot be used as a synonym for Western. To do so is to leave oneself open to all sorts of potential misunderstandings, such as the idea that the world is involved in some kind of evolutionary progress from the traditional to the modern, or that all societies are tending to advance towards an identical international 'modern' culture.

The problem seems to arise mainly from use of the term 'modernisation', especially in remarks such as "modernisation of the country's bureaucracy is continuing". If modern retains its basic accepted meaning of 'contemporary', one may ask how the bureaucracy can become 'more contemporary'. Inevitably, the connotation is that the bureaucracy is developing towards a Western model. This is dangerous, and the key to a rational use of modern/traditional would seem to lie in a careful limiting of the word 'modernisation'. 'Modernisation' must refer to the historical process of change leading up to the situation at the present time. Although it carries the connotations of 'modern' which are given below, it cannot refer to a continuing process, because by its very definition the direction which modernisation will take is not predictable in advance.

In fact most elements of modernisation have indeed been inspired

by technical innovations imported from the West, but then the significance of the colonial experience for a region such as South-East Asia should not be underestimated in a misguided attempt by Western scholars to avoid apparently ethnocentric judgments. What must be made clear is that modernisation is in no way equivalent to Westernisation. Although it involves adaptation to many influences originating in the West, it does not imply 'becoming increasingly like the West'. As Bastin and Benda point out in general terms:

> "... while the Western impact ... introduced great technological, political, and economic changes in the region, it did not necessarily affect the fundamental character of Southeast Asia itself".[1]

With this in mind the definition of 'traditional' and 'modern' becomes easier. The influence of Western technology and associated ideas of political and economic management must be recognised for the crucial forces which they are. While modern must of course retain its basic meaning of contemporary, I shall use it with the added connotation of 'influenced by the West'. Therefore, when I write of 'modern political organisation in the villages', I mean contemporary political organisation which I believe to have been somewhat influenced by Western practices. Traditional, therefore, refers to features which were present before Western influence began, but have not necessarily been abandoned. Thus I talk of fishing by traditional and modern methods (Chapter Five). In fact 'traditional' methods still predominate, while modern methods involving mechanical water pumps and hand grenades are relatively little employed. In this particular case the modern has not evolved from the traditional, nor has it replaced it. It has come to exist alongside it. In the case of modern political organisation it will be seen that various processes have been at work. Some elements of

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1. Bastin and Benda, op.cit., p. viii.

traditional organisation have been adapted (such as the role of the headman), while completely new features (such as parliamentary representation) have come to exist alongside the adapted traditional features. The result, seen as a whole, is 'modern political organisation'.

In conclusion it seems to me more realistic to make use of the distinction modern/traditional in a way which carries some risk of misinterpretation than to eschew use of it altogether. If one eliminated all words having imprecise connotations, one would be left with a slim vocabulary! The two points to be reiterated are first that the words modern and traditional imply no value judgments, and secondly that 'modernisation' is conceptually a completed process, in which the adaptation of features of Western life to local use has played a part.

A number of theoretical constructs have been proposed to aid in the analysis of the contrasts between rural and urban life-styles. The type of theories presented have depended to some extent on the type of urban societies being dealt with, and on the ways which the scientist felt most useful to study them. Thus, the students of industrialised cities tend to adopt a different approach from those looking at commercial or administrative centres. The sociologist, more likely to approach his study via statistics, surveys and questionnaires, may prefer concepts which appear inappropriate to the anthropologist relying on participant observation.

Students of urbanism recognise South-East Asia as a rather special area in terms of the historical development of cities. The great city-states of the region, of which Angkor was the most magnificent, were founded on the principle of divine kingship and were primarily religious

cult centres, with a secondary role as administrative and military power centres.[1] The great commercial cities of the region, of which Malacca was a typical example, were sited with regard to channels of communication and contrasted with the temple cities. With the arrival of colonial powers, the growth of trade and industrial production of cash-crops, cities began to emerge which some have called 'parasitic',[2] because of their role in simply forwarding the production of their rural hinterlands to the industrial centres of Europe, and in consuming the manufactured product when it returned. Rangoon or Saigon would be good examples. The coming of independence, the transformation of communications, agriculture and industry and the population explosion have radically altered the character of South-East Asian cities, rapidly increasing the numbers of their inhabitants, and developing new sets of economic and social relations to deal with the phenomena of modern technology in particular. It is important to note, however, that, unlike most African or American cities, the capitals of modern South-East Asian states are following in traditions of urban living which in some cases are well over 1,000 years old.

These facts make a theoretical construct like the folk-urban continuum[3] particularly inappropriate in South-East Asia. Even disregarding the important criticisms which have been made of the validity of such ideal-types as 'folk', 'peasant' or 'urban' societies, it is crucially important in modern South-East Asia to recognise that modern

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1. One of the best general introductions to South-East Asian cities is still McGee (1967) The Southeast Asian City. Historians who have looked at the conceptual background to the early development of Asian cities include Heine-Geldern (1956) and Coedes (1968).

2. e.g. Hoselitz (1960).

3. Redfield (1947).

urban society is in no sense a simple development out of 'folk' or 'peasant' society. I shall be showing later on, that while the rural and urban areas of Laos are of course linked in many ways, and people and ideas move freely from one to the other, Lao cities have grown up on the basis of quite distinct conceptual foundations, which have stressed their independence from village life. Indeed a more tempting analytical aid is that which distinguishes between influences usually referred to as 'the Great Tradition' and 'the Little Tradition'.[1] The idea that there are two formative influences on the development of some societies, one a great world philosophy, the other a local tradition of adaptation in small groups to a hostile natural environment, is at first sight attractive. Buddhism and the Hindu-inspired notions of statehood would appear to oppose the city to the local 'spirit-cult' tradition of the rural areas. We shall discover, however, in looking at political ideologies in Chapter Six, that it is not as simple as that. It would be wrong to suppose that Great Tradition was in any clear-cut way equivalent to urban and Little Tradition to rural. Indeed the variables are so many and complex that it seems probably safer to avoid the use of ideal-type dichotomies altogether. Oscar Lewis suggests that even Redfield began to see the dangers of over-reliance on such constructs.[2] Certainly the numerous anthropologists who have studied aspects of 'urbanisation' in Africa have for the most part avoided such ideas. The studies by Little and Lloyd in West Africa,[3] Epstein and Mitchell in Central Africa[4] and others throughout the continent have tended to

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1. This distinction, first elaborated by Redfield and his associates, has been widely discussed in its applicability to Indian society. Tambiah discusses it in detail (1970) (p. 367 ff.) and rejects it for reasons similar to mine.
2. Lewis (1973) pp. 126-7.
3. e.g. Little (1965), Lloyd (1959).
4. e.g. Epstein (1958), Mitchell (1966).

look for helpful conceptual tools, rather than global theories in which to place their findings.

One particular concept which has aroused a good deal of interest is that of social networks. This idea of analysing social relations in terms of the contacts made and maintained by given individuals was shown to have great potential by Elizabeth Bott's study of east London.[1] She demonstrated that people in some circumstances have 'close-knit' networks (where they relate to a few people, each in a variety of roles), while others have 'loose-knit' networks (they tend to relate to a wide range of people, each in a single role). The problem with this method is the amount of time, expertise and effort it requires in order to cover the smallest of communities or even a few individuals. Epstein's paper of 1961,[2] for instance, bases its interesting argument for the use of network theory in the study of urban societies on the case-study of a single individual and his network of relationships. As a technique, therefore, it has been more often written about than put into practice. Personally I was unwilling to base a study of a little-known society on the sort of restricted sample that network theory would have imposed. So, while I think one can legitimately discuss social networks in general terms in connection with rural-urban migration, it would be unwise to place too much emphasis on them when the relevant research data are not available.

I am also loathe to consider urbanisation as 'a social process',[3] first because the usefulness of the term 'urbanisation' seems so limited, and secondly because whatever urbanisation is, it can't be

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1. Bott (1971).
2. Epstein (1961).
3. Little (1974).

'a social process' but at the very least a number of intricately linked processes. I prefer to avoid the problem of defining 'urbanisation' by not using it. When referring to people moving from rural areas to towns I use 'rural-urban migration'; when discussing the expansion of cities to cover areas which were formerly rural, I say 'the growth of cities' or some equivalent term, and when referring to the processes of social change which accompany the increase in importance of cities at the expense of villages, and the spread of social behaviour associated with cities into rural areas, I prefer to be more precise in analysing and labelling the individual phenomena concerned rather than lump them all together under 'urbanisation'.

The particular value of many of the African and South American 'urbanisation' studies seems to me to be in the precise conclusions they were able to draw regarding the various social, economic and political processes which their authors observed in operation, and then described using terms and concepts developed for that purpose. For some reason South-East Asia has been relatively poorly served to date by urban anthropologists.

While the cities of Island South-East Asia are beginning to attract more attention (there are already classic studies by Geertz and Wertheim,[1] and well-known articles by Bruner and Alice Dewey, for example[2]) Mainland South-East Asia has for some reason not proved fertile for urban anthropologists. 'Urbanisation' in the area has been tackled by one or two geographers,[3] but Textor's early study[4]

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1. Geertz (1963), Wertheim (ed.) (1958).
2. Bruner (1963), Dewey (1970).
3. e.g. McGee (1967), Goldstein (1976).
4. Textor (1956).

of rickshaw drivers in Bangkok remains a rare example of a detailed study of a small urban community, while Evers[1] has written about Thai urbanisation in more general terms. Other anthropologists in Mainland South-East Asia have been more concerned with the rural life-styles of majority and minority peoples, and have tended to specialise most in the complex religious worlds they found.

Wishing to provide general anthropological information on the Lao people in the context of a study of rural-urban migration, I looked around for conceptual tools which might be helpful in analysing and presenting my data.

Ideologies and practice

The concepts to be most frequently employed depend primarily on what is being described and analysed. It is time therefore to reveal the focal points of this thesis. First of all I shall be trying to describe aspects of the various relationships between urban and rural Laos, whether economic, political or social, as they have developed through time. In particular I shall be concentrating on the differences between ideals expressed in local cultural phenomena about the way things should be, the realistic expectations which people hold, and the patterns which observation allows us to suppose actually exist.[2] I shall therefore refer frequently to ideologies, expectations and practice. Indeed one of the most fascinating aspects of observing Lao society has been to try and analyse the relationship between the ideal and what actually takes place. What is the role of ideal concepts in influencing the way people behave, and particularly in

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1. Evers (1966).

2. This preoccupation is not new. See, for example, Redfield (1960), Pp. 45-6.

influencing the way they talk about behaviour?

One of the most influential, and also most approachable, texts in this field is Raymond Firth's (1971) Elements of Social Organisation, which distinguished between social structure and social organisation in these terms:

> "by the structural aspect of social relations we mean the principles on which their form depends; ... by the organisational aspect we mean the directional activity which maintains their form and serves their ends".[1]

Other crucial remarks in the same paper include:

> "Continuity is expressed in the social structure, the sets of relations which make for firmness of expectations ... social organisation, the systematic ordering of social relations by acts of choice and decision ... structural forms set a precedent and provide a limitation to the range of alternatives possible".[2]

In many ways this distinction between the abstract principles on which social relations are based and the organisational procedures which govern decision-making in concrete situations reflected the sort of distinctions I needed to analyse. There was, however, a certain lack of precision in the definition of structure as "those relations which seem to be of critical importance",[3] and conceptually there seemed to be problems in the explanation of rapid change, which was one of the features which most concerned me.

It was therefore with great interest that I read Maurice Bloch's article The Past and the Present in the Present[4] which addressed

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1. Firth (1971) p. 28.
2. Ibid., p. 40.
3. Ibid., p. 31.
4. Bloch (1977).

precisely these problems.

Although Bloch's analysis of the distinction between structure and organisation has already proved contentious, his discussion of the relationships between the ideal and the everyday seems to me illuminating. In particular the identification of 'social structure' as "folk social theory expressed in (ritual) communication",[1] and the analysis of myth and ritual as areas of communication which legitimize institutionalised inequality, reflected my own findings in observing the evolution of Lao society. Bloch writes that a "legitimate order of inequality" is imposed by "the creation of a mystified 'nature' (and) consisting of concepts and categories of time and persons divorced from everyday experience, and where inequality takes on the appearance of an inevitable part of an ordered system".[2] The legitimacy of hierarchies, how that legitimacy is created, how it is perpetuated by regular ritual performance, and how it is eventually challenged, was a focus of my study of Lao political relations, but is also of interest in the analysis of the developing social relations between kin, spouses, neighbours and colleagues at work.

Whether Bloch's distinction between two separate cognitive systems and languages, one for the realm of ritual communication and the other a universal system of everyday non-ritual communication is so useful, I rather doubt. He uses it to explain how people come to recognise that they are being exploited by an institutionalised hierarchy, and are therefore able to challenge the legitimacy of that hierarchy. Without wishing to go into the problem in detail, it will be more satisfactory in my case to find the source of doubts about the legitimacy

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1. Ibid., p. 286.
2. Ibid., p. 289.

of hierarchies in the conflict between two or more ideologies. Leach has suggested[1] that relations between the Valley people and Hill people of Burma have been greatly influenced over the centuries by the fundamental clash between the Indian political systems and ideologies adopted by the Valley people and the contrasting Chinese models of the Hill people. I have found it most useful to see relations between Lao towns and villages characterised by a fundamental conflict between ideologies - in simple terms between Hindu-Brahman concepts of kingship on the one hand, and Theravada Buddhist ideals of social justice together with indigenous beliefs about the relationship between the village community and the natural environment on the other.

I have been greatly tempted to use 'structure' and 'organisation' as central conceptual tools, in the sense in which Bloch defines them, but have finally rejected the idea as potentially too confusing, since I should be using well-worn terms in a rather unfamiliar and perhaps unacceptable way. I shall instead be talking about 'ideals', 'norms', 'ideology' on the one hand, and 'practice' and 'everyday behaviour' on the other. I shall be giving specific examples of how one influences the other, and how different ideologies may compete with, or complement, each other. I shall look for the source of ideology in myth and ritual and shall see, with Bloch, the performance of ritual as a legitimization of the status quo, though I follow Archaimbault[2] in seeing important signs of change in ideology in the way that rituals may change, develop or be suppressed.

Although the above may appear to indicate concern for analysis, for separating out elements of social and political relations, I am

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1. Leach (1960).
2. See Chapter Three.

nevertheless convinced of the importance of viewing societies as "a totality, a way of living, a system",[1] as Leach has phrased it. Each individual Lao that I met was living in such a system, though few were living in precisely the same system as each other. This thesis sets out to show how the principal features of these systems were derived, how they fitted together, how they moulded attitudes and behaviour, and how people moved from one to another. I hope it is clear that even in a country like Laos the number of systems is infinite, and that the anthropologist is obliged to use the shorthand of words like 'rural', 'urban', 'modern' and 'traditional' in order to describe something approximating to reality. In the impossibility of accurately reflecting life on paper, that description will be partial and flawed. It will have succeeded if it has helped its readers towards an understanding, however limited.

Research methods

The research methods employed were dictated by a number of limiting factors which can be subsumed under the headings: economic, practical, personal. Despite generous financial assistance from the Leverhulme Trust and earlier from the University of Hull, there was obviously no possibility of undertaking the sort of free-spending operation, with Land Rovers, armies of research assistants, batteries of tape recorders and film cameras which some major anthropology projects entail. My funds allowed me to live quite adequately, to employ one assistant and to buy a small motor-cycle. I had a tape recorder and a still camera which I used rather sparingly, for reasons explained below. I was, however, a good deal less well-off than almost all other foreigners working in Laos, who for the most part were enjoying the benefits and

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1. Leach (1974) p. 372.

allowances associated with work in a 'hardship' post. This did cause problems, since it was simply assumed that I was stashing away money in England for my retirement (as the French teachers did) and that my choosing to live in humble accommodation in a relatively unprosperous part of town was further evidence of my 'meanness' with money, since I could obviously afford to rent a comfortable villa if I wanted to.[1]

The practical limitations were more serious. In the next chapter I place the period of research (1972-74) in the context of Lao history. It was a time of preparation for upheaval. A war that had almost become institutionalised by 1970 was now clearly giving way to something else. Which way would things go? Fighting in the streets of Vientiane, military victory to the Pathet Lao, intervention of United States ground forces, a negotiated settlement, or continued stalemate: all were still possible in late 1972. The period then was one of continual adjustment to a changing political and military situation. Officials were constantly reassessing their positions and attitudes, in the light of rumours or unconfirmed reports from this or that source. Education was in a turmoil. Students were in the forefront of moves towards national reconciliation and peace, and there were frequent strikes. It is hardly surprising that officials were reluctant to take much notice of an application to do research from a single research student from a British university of which they might not have heard. In the end, thanks to the efforts of a number of friends and officials, and help from the British Embassy, it was agreed that I should work part-time as a teacher at the Institut Royal de Droit et d'Administration in Vientiane and undertake my research under the general supervision

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1. In fact the rent of a fairly modest modern villa would have consumed my entire allowance since in 1972 they were available at about US $200 a month.

of its Director. This arrangement was quite satisfactory and I taught three hours a week of general social science or English language throughout the two years of research.

One of the most serious practical problems was that of freedom of movement within the country. While the limits of the zones controlled by the Royal Lao Government or the Pathet Lao were fairly accurately identifiable, although quite frequently changing, there were of course always dangers of infiltration, ambush, etc. Indeed the general atmosphere of insecurity in the country allowed bandits and robbers to profit from the situation, and it is probably true that the majority of foreign civilians killed in isolated incidents in Laos were murdered by bandits rather than by the forces of one or other army. Be that as it may, a tall English anthropologist is not at first sight distinguishable to most Lao from a member of the U.S. Central Intelligence Agency, and in travelling around the country one had to be constantly aware what such a misunderstanding might represent to one's own safety and that of one's companions. I was therefore extremely fortunate to be able to undertake a protracted period of research in a totally rural village in the Vientiane plain.

A problem related to that of security was that of establishing an identity. In the town this was not too difficult since I was a teacher at the IRDA, if an obviously rather eccentric one, since I only taught on one day a week and spent the rest of my time asking questions. In the rural areas it was more difficult, since it was widely assumed that the only foreigners who spoke Lao and travelled outside the main towns were Christian missionaries, and that if one denied being one of those, then one was likely to be something rather suspicious, probably classifiable under the vague term nak sū'p (spy). In the research village of Ban Phon Sung itself this was only briefly a

problem, since explanations given to meetings of the village elders quickly reached every household. In the urban research village of Ban Savang, however, the general atmosphere of suspicion and apprehension that was everywhere in the air made research extremely difficult. A teacher who did not stick to teaching was an anomaly. At a time of imminent change town-dwellers in general certainly felt that the less known about them by the 'authorities' the better. They were therefore often reluctant to be interviewed and sometimes gave answers that were at best evasive, at worst misleading. Where this was most obvious was in the attempt to equate a family's expenditure with its income. As an exercise this was fruitless. Expenditure frequently exceeded admitted income by several times. It was considered unwise to probe too deeply into the reasons for this, since to force an interviewee into a position where you are by implication accusing him of corruption was likely to be dangerous to one's future relationship with that person and with other potential interviewees in his neighbourhood.

It was not only confidential information which was difficult to obtain. Facts as apparently simple and essential as date and place of birth were by no means easy to establish. The first problem was that many people had official birthdays and actual birthdays, and in addition they had an official place of birth and an actual place of birth. In the case of age the official might differ from the actual for a number of reasons: age-limits (maximum or minimum) imposed by entry requirements to secondary schools or the civil service; the establishment of an ID (identity) card in later life requiring a wild guess by the village headman since the applicant had no idea of his own age; or just inaccurate record-keeping and copying onto subsequent official documents. Places of birth were most often confused by the need to be born in Laos to obtain an ID card, and the rule requiring the

signature of two 'witnesses' of one's birth to 'prove' that one was in fact born at the time and in the place indicated. Middle-aged migrants from remote provinces might not be able to find anybody in Vientiane twenty years older than they, who came from their village of origin, so they were obliged to find two old men who were willing to 'witness' their birth in Vientiane itself. More frequently however, migrants from North-East Thailand needed to establish their birth in Laos in order to obtain the ID papers essential to continued residence and permission to carry on their trades.

When confronted by a man making notes on a printed form, the first reaction of any Lao is to give his official date and place of birth, or even to pull out his ID card, saying that he has no idea how old he is, but he believes it says somewhere on the card. I always tried to check and obtain the genuine answer, but it is clear that frequently I must have been unsuccessful, either because people simply did not know their age, or because they resolutely stuck to the official version. That I must have been misled on some occasions at least is proved by inaccuracies that came to light only through the pursuit of internal anomalies, such as the young household head in Ban Savang who was identified as being the son of another householder already interviewed. When the two questionnaires were compared, the father had given his son's place of birth as Thailand, while the son himself had claimed to be born in Vientiane.

As can be seen already, the problems faced in rural and urban research were quite different. In the rural village of Ban Phon Sung, once we had got started, there were frew problems. When the village leaders finally agreed to accept the recommendations I had obtained from the administrative authorities and I was invited to take up residence with a local family, it was only a matter of days before most

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people in the village had seen me and knew reasonably well what I was there for. I had twice had the chance to explain at length to meetings of the village elders exactly why I wanted to stay in the village and what sort of things I was interested in. They had had every opportunity to question me and also my assistant. The particular choice of village had two advantages: my assistant, who was not a native of the region, was however closely linked to a leading village family by his friendship with their son. They considered him their adopted son (lūk līang).[1] Secondly, by complete coincidence a young man from another village family was at that time studying in England. Both these facts helped me to establish a climate of confidence more rapidly than would otherwise have been the case.

The first head of household to be interviewed was the village headman. From then on nobody refused to be interviewed, and every household was covered over a fairly short period of time in early 1974, since during that part of the dry season people spend whole days at a time round the house, mending the roof, patching the fishing nets, repairing agricultural tools, looking after livestock and vegetable gardens.

The problem in Ban Phon Sung tended to be not attempts at deception but imprecision and simple ignorance. Women were quite capable of saying that they were 30 years old, that their eldest child was 17 and that they had been 20 when he was born. On one occasion I asked a woman how old her daughter was. The reply was "of marriageable age". "About how many years old?" "About somewhere over 10 years old" (i.e. between 10 and 20).

The reply to a question like "How much rice does your family eat

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1. See Chapter Seven.

in a month?" was often "a lot", or "over 10 baskets" (more than 10 less than 20). Only by patient questioning and gathering of circumstantial evidence could one obtain more accurate answers.

In Ban Savang, the urban village, the problems were quite different and considerably more serious. First, the list of village families held by the headman bore no relation to reality. It listed just over 100 families whereas there were in fact nearly 200. Secondly, the turnover of residents in some parts of Ban Savang was so rapid that once people had moved on, all trace of them was lost within a few weeks. A government census had been taken in February 1973, and I obtained a list of all the heads of households noted for the village. However, two out of the seven wards had clearly been either omitted from the census or attached to some other village in error. My attempt to identify a random sample of one in every three households was only partially successful. For the five wards represented by the 165 household heads in the 1973 census, 16 out of the 55 names selected could no longer be traced by August 1974. Substitutes had therefore to be included, and the numbers were made up to 68 from the other two wards. The sample was in the end neither random nor representative.

Thirdly, although I lived in Ban Savang for almost two years,[1] many people living in the village had neither seen me, nor heard of my work, when I appeared with my assistant to interview them. Two people rejected all persuasion and refused to be interviewed. Others only agreed with the greatest reluctance after the personal intervention

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1. I had a house in Ban Savang which was my base for the entire research period. I was able to reside continuously in Ban Phon Sung only for 3 months in early 1974, though I made many brief visits before and after that time.

of their ward leader. At each interview it was necessary to establish as much of a climate of confidence as possible before asking the important questions. Whereas in Ban Phon Sung many people seemed actually to be looking forward to the interview and knew exactly what it was about, in Ban Savang most people wore worried expressions throughout the exercise, and particularly if other people from outside the family were present, I was often afraid that they were adapting their answers to what they imagined would suit their audience.

One of the most surprising difficulties was actually finding people in. Many wives refused to answer in the absence of husbands, but their husbands might be holding down full-time jobs in the civil service while also being farmers or businessmen. Returning from his office at 5 o'clock, such a man might go straight to his fields and return late at night. At weekends he would work in the fields or go fishing all day. One particular man successfully managed to avoid us altogether over a period of several months, although his wife would make appointments for us, which he always failed to meet.

The implications of these problems for an analysis of 'community' in the urban area are obvious. The urban 'village', though administratively a unit identical to that found in the rural areas, is clearly fragmented within itself, if information passes so slowly and residents spend so little time there. Exactly how the urban 'village' was put together, its cohesive elements and its divisive features, is the subject of much of this thesis. The survey which I conducted in Ban Savang provides me with some of the information presented in support of my analysis, but I have tried to use that data only with the greatest care. Quantitative data is everywhere in this thesis presented with the reservations that it is unlikely to be precisely

accurate, that even where accurate the nature and size of the sample usually renders it statistically insignificant, and that particular considerations overlooked by the researcher may make some figures consistently biassed in one direction or another. The bulk of my analysis rests therefore on the fruit of participant observation and the informal conversations and interviews of which that technique consists. In a few cases interesting interviews developed with respondents to the survey. Indeed some of those interviewed during the survey clearly found that the questions raised corresponded to preoccupations of their own which they had rarely had the opportunity to discuss, and prolonged conversations would ensue which provided me with some of my most important insights into the ways in which people viewed modern urban life.

The rural and urban survey interviews were conducted by myself and my Lao assistant together. The language employed was invariably Lao, even if, as was occasionally the case, the interviewee was fluent in French or English. Usually my assistant would introduce me if I was not already known to the family, explain in general the purpose of the research, and I would then add some slightly more detailed explanations. If it seemed appropriate, especially in the town, my assistant would show the interviewee the official documents authorising the survey. Generally I asked the questions, the answers were noted down on the forms by my assistant, and I wrote as little as possible, only occasionally noting points made in the discussion of the more general questions. Immediately upon return home I checked through my assistant's transcription of the interview, and added any notes of my own. A small number of interviews in the rural village were made by my assistant alone, and likewise I made a few in the urban village when he was not present.

The unit on which the survey was based was the 'household'. Contrary to the position in some cultures the identification of this unit posed few problems. The definition of the household as those people regularly sleeping in a distinct residential structure corresponds in the Lao rural village to the basic domestic unit, a kin group of people who regularly eat together. As will be shown later, the act of moving out of the parental house and building one's own house is the first act in the setting up of a new economic unit, although economic ties with the parent household may remain important until the parents' death. In the urban 'village' the definition of the household need only be refined by using the 'front door' as the distinguishing feature rather than the distinct structure. Where a number of housing units are contained in one structure, all those who use the same front door are members of the same household. As this is the definition which has been applied in virtually all other research in this area, it hardly seemed worth considering the possible advantages, for example, of using the 'couple' and their unmarried children (the nuclear family) as the unit. Some tables in this thesis have been drawn up using 'couples' where this has seemed to be of particular interest (e.g. birth-places of marriage partners), but the word 'family' is used during the analysis of survey data to mean the members of a household as defined above - including outsiders such as resident domestic servants. In fact 48% of the households consist of one nuclear family, and only 8% have more than one married couple in the same household.

I noted above that some of the considerations dictating my research methods might be described as 'personal'. Within this category I include features which may indeed be a function of my personality, those which flow from a conviction of how the anthropologist should

work and those which could be subsumed under 'ethics'.

I was perhaps oversensitive during my research to what it would be appropriate to ask or do at a particular moment. Thus I rarely took notes or asked questions while a ceremony was in progress: this was partly because my research was not concerned with regional differences in Lao ritual, for example, but it was also because I felt note-taking laid emphasis on my role as observer and reduced the element of participation. I did frequently take photographs, however, but very often at the request of the participants. Photography, and particularly the collection and display of family photographs, had entered Lao culture both rural and urban. In many urban houses, and a few wealthier rural ones, photograph albums were kept on the little shelf under the coffee tables in front of which visitors were sat in the reception room. They provided the visitor with an instant escape from the initial silence of embarrassment which might greet his arrival. Photographers, therefore, were allowed free rein in almost any circumstances and were particularly welcomed at family ceremonies which might otherwise go unrecorded. Note-taking, however, was clearly a different sort of activity, and in my keenness not to be obtrusive I certainly missed opportunities to obtain useful information which ritual specialists, for example, might have been quite happy to give me.

I therefore also used my tape-recorder with great care, using it only to record music or ritual performances. On each occasion I would make it quite clear when I was switching it on and off, and never used it to record conversations or interviews. Frequently it would have been marvellous to have had it turned on, but I wanted to avoid the remotest chance that what people told me would be influenced by any suspicion that the tape-recorder was being used to preserve their words,

which might then be used against them by the authorities, or even be heard by people who would 'laugh at their soul' when they heard such old-fashioned ideas.

Other anthropologists that I have observed at work are vigorous note-takers and askers of questions. These people induce in me a depressing feeling of my own inactivity and incompetence. But in the end I am convinced it is pointless, even counterproductive, to ask a question or even to note an observation unless one has at least a suspicion that the question may be important or the observation significant. One is obliged anyway to make a pre-selection of facts to be recorded as well as a later choice of those recorded facts to be presented in analysis or description. I therefore certainly tended to err on the side of silence, allowing a conversation to take its course rather than try to direct it into channels which particularly interested me. By this relative silence and inaction I tried to create in my friends and neighbours a feeling that I was with them because I enjoyed their company and valued their friendship, rather than that I had come simply to find out about them and then sell that knowledge to my masters: for the notion of information having a monetary value was well understood in a society bedevilled with political rivalries.

My approach to the people being studied has certainly had an influence on the way this thesis has turned out. In my view of life figures and analysis of data cannot provide half the insight that is contained in watching the reaction of people to true-life situations. I persist in believing that computerised predictions of behaviour in given circumstances may provide useful superficial information, but that for people to understand people, which is after all the purpose of anthropology, one needs to build up a personal experience of how people react, in words and actions, to particular questions, statements

or events. Having undertaken a survey, one is tempted to produce statements like "20% of rural males over 30 had received more than 3 years of primary school". I have tried to resist this temptation, except where I felt that such statements were of specific interest. Usually I have preferred to record the comments, for example, of a 35 year old farmer on the value of education, and what he hopes his children will achieve with it.

The danger with my method is that it appears to cast an even greater weight of responsibility on the integrity and competence of the anthropologist. He can record any conversation, choose any example, emphasise any feature to prove his point. This appearance, however, may be an illusion. Writers such as Andreski in Social Sciences as Sorcery[1] have shown how statistical evidence from surveys can be botched, biassed or even simply invented. The greatest danger to a social scientist is to set out blindly to prove a point. Then indeed the mind begins to select and reject, often quite unconsciously. What we forget perhaps is the extent to which all social enquiry depends on the integrity and competence of the social scientist, and the more interesting the topic, the more prominent the role of the researcher's intelligence. The anthropologist then, who relies on a deep familiarity with the people he is describing and on his participation in, and observation of, their activities, is applying a technique which need not be scientifically less rigorous, and may be intellectually far more exacting, than the social survey conceived in an office, administered by assistants and analysed by a computer.

I have indicated in the Acknowledgements some of the difficulties of communication which led me to omit all individual Lao names from the

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1. Andreski (1972).

list of those who helped me, given the impossibility of establishing whether certain people would wish to have their names mentioned. Related problems have to be tackled regarding the presentation of the thesis. After a great deal of thought I have decided on the following: the names of places, where given, are genuine. Specifically the two research villages, Ban Phon Sung and Ban Savang, can be found on the map. It seemed pointless to try to disguise these, even had it been desirable. Far too many people know where the research was done, and to give false names might give the impression that what I discovered in the two villages was somehow shocking or unpalatable. The names of all individual Lao given in the text, however, apart from bibliographical references, have been changed. This is because it has been impossible to discover whether certain individuals, who gave me confidential information, would wish to be named. In certain cases circumstantial evidence relating to people described has been altered in order to make identification less obvious. Some data has deliberately not been included owing to the remote possibility that it might cause embarrassment to those concerned. On the whole these restrictions have caused few problems. The most disappointing thing perhaps is being unable to take examples of the exercise of a headman's functions from the two research villages, since the identity of those involved could not be disguised.

I should perhaps make it clear that my caution in these matters is not dictated by any idea that what I have written may displease any section of its Lao readership, whether in government or private life, but rather by the fear that even one or two individuals who would have been quite happy to see their names in print in 1974, may by now have lived through experiences which have caused them to change their minds. Rather than risk the possibility of causing distress, I

hope to have erred on the side of caution.

Design

The design of a work like this is bound to be unsatisfactory in some ways, since one is obliged to divide up things that really belong together. Thus I thought for a long time that my basic division would be Part I Rural, Part II Urban, and that each part would provide a rounded whole which could be compared with the other. It eventually became clear that this would make the regular comparison of rural and urban features, which was after all the core of the thesis, decidedly more difficult. Suddenly it was obvious that however much one disliked distinctions into economic, social and political sectors, this was a better way to present rural and urban comparative data.

Part I, consisting of three quite short chapters, provides the introductory background material. After the treatment of theoretical and methodological considerations and research techniques in this chapter, Chapter Two looks at the basic history and geography needed to situate the research in its appropriate time and space, and Chapter Three examines the existing literature on Lao society. Part II is the centrepiece of the thesis, and after an introduction (Chapter Four) to the research villages and the area surrounding them, consists of three major chapters looking respectively at economy, politics and society. Part III consists of a concluding chapter, summarising my findings in an essay on migration and modernisation. A brief consideration of Laos since 1974 has been placed in Appendix 1 to bring the reader up-to-date on events and trends. This is followed by a chronology of Lao kings and the bibliography.

While fairly frequent reference is made backwards and forwards in the text to passages providing background or giving added detail on a particular topic, the three central chapters are each intended to be more or less self-contained, allowing those interested in contrasts in rural and urban economies, for example, to read Chapter Five alone, with only minimal reference to other parts of the work. My hope is that the design of this thesis will allow those seeking particular information to find it with the minimum of difficulty, while those who are trying to obtain a balanced picture of life in Laos will find that it is built up in logical and easy-to-follow stages.

CHAPTER TWO HISTORY AND GEOGRAPHY OF LAOS

Competent introductions to the main historical and geographical features of Laos are easier to find than any other kind of information on the country. It might therefore seem wise simply to refer the reader to these texts and concentrate in this thesis on the aspects of social life totally unrepresented in the literature. To do so, however, would be to omit much that is relevant to the way Lao life has developed in modern times, and therefore to deprive myself of a canvas on which to sketch a portrait of modern society. My geographical introduction is therefore intended to situate the Lao people in the context of their spatial and natural environment. It shows the influence on their development of mountains, rivers, climate and international boundaries, and describes how they have adapted to particular environmental conditions.

History includes the study of sources and patterns of development. Knowing the origin of an idea may help to understand its present influence on people. My summary of Lao history will therefore focus on features of the Lao past which can be expected to illuminate the present I am trying to describe. I shall emphasise four themes: the history of urban settlements, the origins of the idea of statehood and kingship, the sources of modern religious ideas and the relations between different ethnic groups.

History[1]

King Fa Ngum, who reigned in Luang Prabang from 1353 to 1373, is the first Lao monarch about whom there is enough documentary evidence to interest a historian. Since the period prior to his accession is so shrouded in mystery, Lao history proper is usually taken to begin with that date.

Fa Ngum was brought up at the court of the Khmer king, Parathak-hemaraja, at Angkor, where he and his father had been welcomed after being exiled by his grandfather, King Souvannakhamphong. The Khmer king eventually provided them with an army, advisers and one of his daughters to be Fa Ngum's wife, in the hope that they would retake their kingdom, and thus reduce the pressure he was feeling from the Siamese who had newly established their capital at Ayutthaya. Although unable to halt the decline of the Khmer empire, his aim was largely realised, since father and son deposed Souvannakhamphong, having systematically fought their way north and obtained the loyalty of local princes. It was Fa Ngum who became king, however, since his father died just before they reached Luang Prabang.[2]

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1. The history from which most modern writers on Laos have obtained background information is Le Boulanger's (1931) Histoire du Laos français. Paul Lévy's (1974) Histoire du Laos has been able to incorporate some of the more recent archeological discoveries and brings the story up to date. Other general histories are by Jumsai (1971) and Viravong (1964). There are, however, serious problems about the reliability of 'facts' and dates in the various Lao histories. Archaimbault (1967) in his study of the annals of Xieng Khouang, points out that the four surviving versions of the annals are irreconcilably inconsistent. He suggests (ibid., p. 563) that Le Boulanger borrowed selectively from different historical texts without indicating his sources, in order to create a coherent account, which remains the standard work. Archaimbault concludes his introduction to the annals, "if reading this commentary might discourage any attempts at one day elaborating a 'history' of Laos, we shall esteem that we have not entirely wasted our time". (ibid., p. 561).

2. For a summary list of Lao kings and their 'dates', see Appendix 2.

It has generally been assumed that Fa Ngum introduced into Laos both Theravada Buddhism and Hindu theories of kingship and national administration, following models he had studied in Cambodia, and that he brought with him Buddhist monks and possibly Brahman officials who helped to propagate these new ideas. This view has been held largely because so little was known about the period before 1350. The annals of the kingdom simply give a list of names, without dates, of supposed kings or princes of Luang Prabang before Fa Ngum's grandfather, while the stories of the origins of the Lao people were dismissed as fantastic myths.[1]

More recently, however, historians have begun to re-examine the evidence in the light of modern archeological discoveries and knowledge of migratory patterns in the region, and the suggestion is that the small amounts of information in the annals may be quite accurate and that even some of the myths may be less fanciful than had been supposed. A possible scenario, which has interesting implications regarding the origins of both political and religious systems in Laos, might go roughly as follows: the principal inhabitants of the Mekong river valleys, and indeed of most of the Indo-Chinese peninsula, during the early centuries of the Christian era were peoples of the Mon-Khmer language group.[2] Those Mon-Khmer speakers who had settled on the coasts of the peninsula were the most likely to be influenced by the ideas brought in from the Indian sub-continent, and the great civilis-

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1. Lao myth and ritual is known thanks almost entirely to the work of Charles Archaimbault (see Chapter 3). His account of the various Lao myths of origin is in Archaimbault (1973b).

2. The Chams (a Malayo-Polynesian speaking group) had an empire in what is now Central Vietnam from c. 200-1471 AD, which was gradually destroyed by the southward movement of Vietnamese and the northward pressure of Khmers.

ations of Funan (100-600 AD), Chenla (600-900 AD) and Angkor (900-1434 AD) all flourished in the area which is now the coast of Cambodia and southern Vietnam, while the Mon kingdom was on the coast of present-day southern Burma. The Tai[1] peoples, meanwhile, were becoming increasingly significant in southern China (Yunnan), though relations with the Han Chinese were usually strained. For reasons that are unclear, small groups of Tai had probably begun to move south, infiltrating the Mon-Khmer settlements, since the first years of the Christian era. This movement was peaceful and the Tai integrated themselves skilfully with the existing populations.[2]

By the early thirteenth century, however, two crucial developments had occurred. Many Tai groups were adopting sophisticated principles of political organisation above the village level, based on Indian or Chinese models, and at the same time the Mongol invasions of China hastened the need for a decisive move to the south.

Lao legend says that the Tai peoples originated from Muong Theng (the Kingdom of the gourd) (Dien Bien Phu) and that their leader Khoun Bourom divided up the world between his seven sons, sending each to establish his kingdom in a different spot. The eldest son, Khoun Lo, was given the area centred on Xieng Dong Xieng Thong (Luang Prabang) and established the Lao kingdom there.[3] If this story is adapted by imagining a concentration of Tai peoples from southern China and northern

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1. Following established practice the spelling Tai is used to refer to all speakers of Tai languages (i.e. Siamese Tai of Central Thailand, the Lao, the Shans of Burma, the Tai Dam, etc.), while the spelling Thai is reserved for the people of the Central Thai Plain, their language and also, in a modern context, the people of Thailand.

2. cf. Lévy, P. (1974) pp. 38-39.

3. Archaimbault (1973b).

Vietnam moving down into the area centred on Dien Bien Phu, where their leaders advised a number of groups to set out in different directions in search of permanent settlements (directions in which Tai people had been travelling and trading in small groups for hundreds of years), we have a not totally unreasonable explanation for the rapid emergence of politically advanced Tai kingdoms over a large part of the Indo-Chinese peninsula in the thirteenth and fourteenth centuries. This development was further assisted by the concurrent decline of the Khmer empire, which had finally overreached itself with its northward expansion (as far as Vientiane) and its phenomenal building programme.

The interest of such a theory is that it calls into question the primacy of the Cambodian influence on Lao theories of kingship and administration. There is also some reason to imagine that Buddhism may already have been known to the Tai peoples before their southward movement out of China into areas where they felt the influence of their Khmer, Burmese and Mon neighbours.[1] If so, the Buddhism would probably have been Mahayana Buddhism, brought into China by the northern route from Tibet. There is in any case no doubt that Fa Ngum did bring with him influential political and religious ideas from Cambodia and that his personal success in uniting a large number of disparate Lao elements under one leadership based in Luang Prabang was crucial to the future development of the Lao kingdom. All in all the range of influences that have been active in determining Lao views of life may have been somewhat wider than is usually supposed. Some of

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1. It has recently been suggested on the basis of archeological discoveries in the Vientiane Plain (cf. Gagneux (1972)) that there may have been Buddhist settlements of Mon peoples in the area as early as the 7th or 8th centuries (Lévy, P. (1974) p. 36).

those influences will be identified in later chapters, particularly those dealing with political and religious ideologies. Suffice it to say that, with the arrival of Fa Ngum, all four of my principal concerns in Lao history had already become significant features of the life of this early kingdom - Luang Prabang was becoming an urban centre, Buddhism was being preached, superior forms of political organisation were in place and the relations maintained by the Lao people with the Mon-Khmer speaking peoples of their hinterland were already crucial to their prosperity.

The following 600 years of history have seen the fortunes of the Lao kingdom ebb and flow with the varying talents of their leaders and with the power of the states which surrounded them. The main features of the period between Fa Ngum's death in 1374 and the death of King Souligna Vongsa in 1694 can be briefly sketched in. Fa Ngum's son, Samsenthai, reigned for 43 years, consolidating in peace the military gains of his father. His reign was also a period of extension of political and religious organisation. Samsenthai took his name (300,000 Tais) from the results of a census of his kingdom which showed 300,000 male adults of Tai race. There were apparently 400,000 non-Tais as well, which would give a figure for the population of his state not very different from the 3 to 3.5 million of the present Lao nation.

The next king of note was Setthathirath who reigned from 1548 to 1571. He is distinguished particularly for his resistance against repeated Burmese invasions. Where his predecessors had had differences with the Siamese king at Ayutthaya, Setthathirath managed to unite with the Siamese to resist the invaders from the north. As part of his defences he moved his capital from Luang Prabang, too vulnerable to attack, to Vientiane, where he constructed his palace and its temple to house the Emerald Buddha, Wat Phra Keo. A mile outside the city

walls he built the great temple of Wat That Luang ('Royal/Great Stupa') which has remained a focal point of Lao nationhood.

Setthathirath's death, as so often with the demise of great Lao kings, preceded a period of anarchy and confusion, from which the country was eventually rescued by a remarkable monarch, Souligna Vongsa, who reigned for no less than 57 years from 1637 to 1694. During his reign Souligna Vongsa received visits from the Dutch trader Van Wusthoff (1641) and a Jesuit priest Father Leria (1642-7). Although both visits took place during the early years of the reign, the reports which resulted are unanimous regarding the splendour of life in the capital, the peaceful prosperity of its inhabitants, and the just but firm dictatorship of the king.[1] Vientiane appears to have been a centre of Buddhist learning for the whole peninsula and arts and crafts flourished, but life was carefree and pleasant, although there is some talk of unpopular and corrupt mandarins.[2]

The situation was not to last. Souligna Vongsa had his only legitimate son executed for adultery, and in 1694, at his death, the kingdom fell prey to the internecine strife from which it has never recovered. Where Souligna Vongsa kept regional princes, like the prince of Xieng Khouang, in careful check, and where the neighbouring kings of Burma, Siam and Vietnam had sent him tribute and kept themselves at a respectful distance, the new princes could agree on nothing and the great kingdom was divided into its constituent princedoms of Luang Prabang, Vientiane and Champassak, each too weak to resist the demands for tribute of more powerful outsiders.

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1. Marini (1666).
2. Le Boulanger (1931) p. 115.

In the eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries the distance of the Lao heartlands from the sea meant that her maritime neighbours were the first to make contact with the expanding colonial trading powers, and Lao princes, whose ancestors had been looked up to by kings hundreds of miles away, found themselves treated like recalcitrant district officials by the King of Siam in Bangkok and the Emperor of Annam at Hue.

The Siamese Thai had begun a period of rapid expansion and consolidation of administrative control with the establishment of their capital at Bangkok in 1782 and the simultaneous foundation of one of the first strong and durable dynasties in the region, the Chakkri. But the Lao were not to cede their place of note in the peninsula without one final flourish of quixotic courage and recklessness which, with its catastrophic denouement, sounded the death knell to hopes for a genuinely independent Lao kingdom.[1]

In modern Laos Chao Anou, prince of Vientiane from 1805 to 1838, is considered a hero, even though the final results of his efforts to free the Lao monarchy from Siamese suzerainty were so disastrous. In simple terms he risked a limited autonomy and considerable prosperity as a vassal of the Siamese king in Bangkok, for the remote possibility of a victory which would ensure total independence for Vientiane. His failure was complete. In 1828, after Chao Anou had been repulsed from his march on Bangkok, the Siamese army sacked the city of Vientiane and carried off what remained of the population, not only of the town but also of the surrounding plain, as prisoners. They were resettled under close supervision well to the south and west of the Mekong

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1. Wyatt (1963) offers an interesting account of the period leading up to Chao Anou's revolt.

although many died on the way. Chao Anou himself escaped and wandered around neighbouring capitals trying to rally support. In this he was unsuccessful and he was eventually handed over to the Siamese by Chao Noi, prince of Xieng Khouang, to die in captivity in Bangkok.

The princely house of Vientiane was thus destroyed, and by 1840 the King of Champassak had accepted the post of provincial governor under direct Siamese administration. Xieng Khouang had a Vietnamese mandarin administering its affairs on behalf of the Emperor of Annam in Hue, and only the king of Luang Prabang preserved a modicum of independence under Bangkok's increasingly close supervision.

With the advantage of hindsight it seems almost inconceivable that a Lao monarchy could have survived the end of the nineteenth century, had it not been for the sudden interest of the French in ensuring that it did so. We can suppose that what is now Laos would instead be divided between present-day Thailand and Vietnam, with Cambodia and China possibly claiming small areas (if Cambodia had itself avoided partition between Thailand and Vietnam). That this did not occur was largely due to the French desire to halt British expansionism in Burma and to the remarkable character of one Auguste Pavie, who happened to come upon the city of Luang Prabang at the very moment when its royal family had become almost complete subordinates of Siamese resident commissioners, and when the north of Laos as a whole was prey to the pillaging of Yunnanese bandits (otherwise known as the Ho), whom the Siamese were having considerable difficulty in suppressing. In 1887, then, as Auguste Pavie surveyed the city of Luang Prabang for the first time from the opposite bank of the Mekong, he was looking at what was the only urban area of more than 5,000 inhabitants in the entire country. Of the other four modern urban centres, Thakkek, Savannakhet

and Pakse had not yet been founded and Vientiane was a shell, almost completely abandoned. The only towns of any importance besides Luang Prabang were Xieng Khouang and Champassak.[1]

French interest in Laos had begun in the 1860s when the possibility of using the Mekong as a trade route from Saigon into Southern China was being examined and an expedition (Doudart de Lagrée, Garnier) travelled up the river in 1866 as far as Luang Prabang before proceeding north on foot. The enormous difficulties they encountered convinced the French authorities, however, that the key to southern China was Tonkin and the Red river rather than Laos and the Mekong. Although further expeditions were mounted, it was French alarm at British successes in Burma and apparently growing British influence over the Siamese court at Bangkok which prompted the appointment of Pavie as Vice-Consul at Luang Prabang.[2]

Timing, and the combination of circumstances, allowed Pavie to save the Luang Prabang monarchy from absorption by Siam. But the kingdom which was eventually carved out by the French was never a fully viable political or economic entity. Le Boulanger's standard history of the country is called Le Laos français by clear opposition to 'Siamese Laos', the large plateau on the right bank of the Mekong, now known as North-East Thailand (or "the 16 provinces") in which the great majority of ethnic Lao speakers still live.

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1. P. de Barthelémy (1898) has a map in which only Luang Prabang, Xieng Khouang and Bassac (Champassak) are distinguished as centres of some importance, and even Xieng Khouang was apparently still a ruined shell at the end of the century following its destruction in 1866 by Ho pirates. (cf. Archaimbault (1967)).

2. The story of Pavie's extraordinary exploits is contained in his A la Conquête des Coeurs (1947).

To establish the Mekong river as the principal dividing line between "Laos" and "Thailand" was a bit like declaring that the river Thames will henceforth be an international boundary.[1] The Mekong was the channel of communication par excellence for the Lao peoples of its valley, who established themselves interchangeably on either side. The gradual formalisation of the boundary as the French administration took hold during the early twentieth century did not interrupt the commerce and movement of people from one side to the other, but it necessitated the establishment of new urban centres on the French side to serve areas which had previously looked to Ubon and Nakhon Phanom (on the Thai side) as the nearest centres of commerce and administration. These new towns, Thakkek, Savannakhet and Pakse, initially attracted only a few migrants from the surrounding rural areas. Those Lao most likely to welcome their establishment were those already living in the urban areas on the other side of the Mekong, and many crossed over, including certainly a fair number of those families who had been transported from Vientiane and the Thakkek area by the Siamese invasions early in the nineteenth century. But the establishment of these towns, and the regeneration of Vientiane, was achieved by the French mainly through the help of Vietnamese migrants. As late as 1943 85% of the population of Thakkek was Vietnamese (6,900 out of 8,100), and the corresponding figures for other towns were 72.5% (4,000 out of 5,500) for Savannakhet, 62% (4,500 out of 7,300) for Pakse, and 53% (12,400 out of 23,200) for Vientiane. Only in Luang Prabang were Lao in a majority in a Lao town (3,000 out of 4,950, or 61%).

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1. The French clearly assumed, until the early twentieth century, that they would eventually obtain direct control over 'North-East Thailand' from the Siamese (cf. Charles Simond's introduction to Barthelémy (1898), entitled "L'expansion française dans le Laos").

After 50 years of colonial interest, then, only 15,460 Lao lived in towns of more than 2,000 inhabitants, and Pietrantoni[1] suggests that even of these, 4,600 were really rural dwellers who had been included because administrative boundaries happened to cover them. So it is perhaps reasonable to conclude that at the end of the Second World War there were some 10,000 Lao with experience of urban living.

The extraordinarily slow growth of the urban centres during the first 50 years of colonial rule (the total population of the six largest towns in 1943 was only 51,150, of whom 30,700 were Vietnamese and 4,130 Chinese) was due primarily to French calculation of the high cost of economic development, compared with the potential return on investment available in Vietnam and Cambodia. Consequently only the minimum infrastructure was put in place. Education, health care and transport systems were still rudimentary at the moment of independence in 1954. Certainly those French entrepreneurs who did start projects in Laos found the Lao villager unwilling to work for wages[2] and used imported Vietnamese labour instead, for example, in the tin mines near Thakkek. But if the movement of Lao to the towns was slow during the first 50 years of the century, it was extremely rapid in the next 25. It will be useful to examine briefly the historical circumstances which prompted this transformation.

The defeat of the French by the Japanese in 1940 shattered the myth of superiority of the colonial power (just as in Malaya and Indonesia), although French administrators continued at their posts in Indo-China

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1. Pietrantoni (1957).

2. The reasons for this, and the general reputation for 'laziness' which the Lao have been accorded, are examined in Chapter Five.

until the Japanese "coup" of 9 March 1945.[1] The end of the war saw the Japanese surrender accepted for the allies by the British in the south (south of the 16th parallel) and by the Nationalist Chinese of Chiang Kai Shek in the north. The power vacuum that this left in the north (the Chinese were far too busy with their own problems) allowed members of the tiny French-educated elite to claim their independence, as Ho Chi Minh was doing in Hanoi. The Lao leaders, however, could not obtain the support of King Sisavang Vong for such a move, and their organisation and the forces at their disposal were so weak that they were unable to resist the return of the French in 1946, achieved with the connivance of the British occupying forces in the south, (although there was some resistance, largely of Vietnamese, around Thakkek).

Most of the emerging Lao leadership fled to Bangkok, but the wide variety of views and aims represented in this exiled community soon became clear. When the French offered partial self-government within the French Union, the majority of the exiles seized the opportunity to return and participate. Notable among them was Prince Souvanna Phouma, younger brother of Prince Phetsarath, who had led the movement for independence in 1945, and elder half-brother of Prince Souphanouvong, leader of the group of exiles who refused to accept the French offer and who, under the banner of the Lao Issara (Free Lao) took to the mountains to organise resistance.

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1. Works on the political history of Laos from the Second World War to the present day are relatively numerous. One of the fairest and most succinct, though becoming outdated now, is Toye (1968). Another standard work is Dommen (1971). Other useful studies include Adams and McCoy (1970), Burchett (1957, 1963, 1970b), Fall (1957, 1965), Field (1965), Goldstein (1973), Simmonds (1963, 1968), Stevenson (1972), Thee (1973) and Vongvichit (1968).

Prince Souphanouvong's movement, supported and encouraged by Ho Chi Minh and the Vietminh, slowly built up a following, particularly among the minority peoples of the northern and eastern parts of the country, and attracted a few dissident intellectual Lao from the valley towns who provided the nucleus of its leadership. The battle of Dien Bien Phu, the Geneva Conference on Indo-China of 1954, and the granting of complete independence to Laos in the same year, essentially turned the Lao Issara from an anti-colonial liberation movement into a socialist opposition. A number of attempts were made to integrate the movement, later known as the Neo Lao Hak Sat (Lao Patriotic Front), into the Royal Lao Government - notably in 1954, 1957 and 1962, but all were short-lived, as the basic opposition of views made genuine rapprochement impossible. The country was therefore in a de facto state of civil war from 1949 to 1975.

The period of independent constitutional monarchy (1954 to 1975) was dominated by the war, by the activities of the United States government and by the rapid movement of population consequent on these two features. One of the crucial points in a complex series of events was the coup d'état of Kong Le in 1960, a genuinely neutralist attempt to take Laos out of big power politics. Kong Le's forces were crushed by right-wing elements under Phoumi Nosavan, who moved on Vientiane from Savannakhet, where he had been armed and equipped by the CIA with Thai support, even though Kong Le's government, with Prince Souvanna Phouma as Prime Minister, was recognised by the United States Embassy. This defeat effectively polarised the competing forces into the two groups (pro-American and pro-Communist) in which they were to confront each other until 1973.

It is frequently asserted that if the Lao had been left to settle their differences without outside interference, the war would soon have

been over. Whatever the truth of this, it is certain that the means put at their disposal, and the men and equipment employed on their behalf, greatly exceeded anything they could have produced themselves. American planes dropped bombs, Thai and Vietnamese ground troops fought using American, Chinese and Russian equipment, and the people of Laos were killed, injured and displaced. Young men of decreasing age (soldiers aged 9 were reported in General Vang Pao's 2nd Military Region) were recruited and sent to the front. Yet it would be wrong to give the impression that the country was in a permanent state of war for 26 years. In the early years clashes were rare and were generally confined to a few key areas. American bombing began in 1964, but was concentrated in Xieng Khouang province and down the eastern border area known as the Ho Chi Minh trail. These were the areas which suffered most from the war as a whole. Indeed whole stretches of the Mekong valley, which remained under the control of the Royal Lao Government throughout the period, escaped any direct involvement in the war apart from the recruitment of their sons. Yet no area was immune from the consequences of war. These consequences are of course closely linked to the major themes of urban growth, migration, economic and political development which form the meat of this thesis. It is perhaps worth pointing out here, though, how absolutely crucial was the interest of the United States government in the way things developed and the enormous sums of money which they were willing to spend up until 1975.

In February 1973 a cease-fire agreement was signed in Vientiane between the "Vientiane side" (Royal Lao Government (RLG)) and the "Pathet Lao side" (Lao Patriotic Front). This was followed by a Protocol in September of the same year, and the Provisional Government of National Union (PGNU), in which each side had equal representation, came into

being in April 1974. In December 1975, pressured to some extent by the fall of Saigon and Phnom Penh which had caused a number of right-wing leaders to flee the country, and also by the sharp fall in American financial support, the "Pathet Lao side" seized complete power by causing the king to abdicate, abolishing the monarchy and declaring the birth of the Lao People's Democratic Republic, in which all ministerial posts were taken by members of the Lao Patriotic Front.

Analysis

From this extremely condensed account of Lao history it is nevertheless possible to draw together a number of conclusions which may provide illumination (or themselves be further illuminated) in later parts of the thesis.

As a first general point it is worth noting that most of the territory we now know as Laos is situated at a strategic point in terms both of traditional migratory patterns and of modern political geography. The Mekong river, which runs the whole length of the country, is a natural channel of communication from north to south and is crossed at a number of points along its course by natural east-west routes. The north-west province of Nam Tha, for example, has borders with Burma, Thailand and China, and forms part of the notorious Golden Triangle. It also lies on the most southerly of the old caravan routes from Europe and India to the coastal towns of China. It is estimated that forty languages are spoken among its population of approximately 155,000.

The vulnerability of Laos as the sandwich in regional conflicts has meant that its people have frequently suffered the consequences of life on a battlefield and instability of political leadership. Rather like the people of parts of Holland and Belgium which are the most

fought-over areas of Europe, the Lao have developed a certain resilience to disruption, which seems to allow them to resume life relatively easily where it left off.

My second general point concerns the viability of Laos as an economic and political entity. At no point since the collapse of Souligna Vongsa's splendid kingdom at the end of the seventeenth century has Laos given cause to suppose that it could form a successful and autonomous nation-state with a thriving economy. The economic problems, examined in detail in Chapter Five, stem primarily from geographic considerations. The country is landlocked, the Mekong, which is the one unifying channel of communication, is not navigable throughout its length, and mountains separate the sparse population from easy contacts. For the volume of trade generated by so small a population the cost of transport is bound to be exceptionally high.

From these economic considerations questions of the viability of Laos as a modern independent nation flow naturally. The country has not achieved genuine independence since Souligna Vongsa. Siamese and Vietnamese suzerainty was exchanged for French, briefly Japanese, colonial control. Official independence in 1954 divided the country into those who relied on American and Thai support and those who preferred to look to Vietnam and other socialist countries. Even now, since the formation of the Lao People's Democratic Republic, it is becoming clear that Laos can only survive politically so long as it is expedient for its neighbours to permit it, and that economic survival will depend on a return almost to a subsistence economy, from which it may be possible to construct some sort of agriculture-based system, in the absence of the kind of 'windfall' foreign exchange assistance which the Americans used to provide.

Closely linked to the viability of Laos as a nation is the fragility of its political unity. Time and time again its great kings have been succeeded by virtual anarchy as rival factions contended for power. Samsenthai, Setthathirath and Souligna Vongsa had all built up what appeared to be stable and prosperous systems of government only for the whole thing to be destroyed after their deaths by internecine strife. Chao Anou had apparently made considerable progress in restoring Vientiane to something approaching its former magnificence when he gambled the whole achievement on a reckless exploit. Nevertheless Lao opinion proclaims him a hero for trying to preserve the national honour or piap (a concept discussed in the next chapter).

Contrary to what might be supposed, there is little evidence to suggest that the Lao of North-East Thailand are keen to take their political destiny into their own hands or to confide it to their brothers in Vientiane. Much as the style of rule from Bangkok may be resented in the '16 provinces' of the region, independence movements or 'pan-Lao' associations have had almost no success compared with that of the Communist Party of Thailand, itself relatively limited. One might even imagine that the Lao were unwilling to entrust their political future to a leadership of their own people, mindful perhaps of the appalling sufferings into which their historical leaders so regularly led their ancestors.

The third general feature of Lao history which I wish to analyse is the way in which the Lao have related to the minority peoples with whom they were living in close proximity. Until colonial times this relationship, though in some senses ambiguous owing to the minority peoples' expertise in magic and spirit propitiation, was viewed by the Lao as a simple one of superior/inferior. The minorities, predominantly

speakers of a variety of Mon-Khmer languages, were known collectively as Khā, meaning 'slaves', (a function which they frequently fulfilled). The Khā depended on the Lao for certain economic necessities such as salt and cotton, for which they appear to have been systematically exploited in some regions. Denied access to education and Buddhism in some parts, they had no political organisation above the level of the village and are not mentioned as a significant political force in histories from Fa Ngum until the early twentieth century.[1]

French colonial rule disrupted the political relationship between the Lao and the minorities, and the Christian missionaries, who had so little success among the Lao, found the Kha notably more receptive to their ideas. In the south a revolt of the Kha Loven led by Kommadam (father of Sithone[2]) went on intermittently for 25 years and was only put down when Kommadam was killed in 1936. In the north the Hmong (Meo, Miao) and the Mien (Man, Yao) peoples,[3] Sino-Tibetan speakers with a long tradition of fierce independence from Imperial control in the southern provinces of China, began to infiltrate down into the mountains of Luang Prabang, Xieng Khouang and Sam Neua in the mid-nineteenth century. Their clan organisation and tradition of resistance

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1. The 'Kha' were, however, significant for their numbers and the types of relationship established with the dominant Lao. Aspects of their economic and social relations with the Lao, and their role in Lao national political rituals, are discussed in later chapters.

2. Sithone Kommadam led many groups of Kha into alliance with the Pathet Lao. He was a Vice-President of the Lao People's Democratic Republic until his death in 1977.

3. Hmong is the name by which the first group refer to themselves. Meo is the Thai and Lao name for them and derives from Miao, the Chinese term, meaning 'barbarian'. I shall refer to them as Hmong (cf. Lemoine (1972)). Similarly Mien is the name used for themselves by the people known in Thailand and Laos as Man, and in China as Yao.

made them more susceptible to mass political organisation and their practice of opium production soon gave them an important economic role in the northern part of the country.

The call which Prince Souphanouvong and his colleagues put out in 1949 to resist the French (and later the Americans and the Lao right-wing leadership) struck a responsive chord in many minority villages - among the Kha since they were becoming aware of the extent to which they were being denied basic rights, and among the Hmong - although here internal rivalries between the different clans meant that the Hmong provided important fighting units on both sides.

The Pathet Lao, even to this day, represent basically an alliance between disaffected Lao intellectuals and oppressed racial minorities of disadvantaged middle peasants.[1] Although not many of the Pathet Lao leaders are themselves from minorities, most of the rank-and-file membership are, and they are the ones who have had contact with the local population under the new socialist regime since 1975.[2]

In the fourth and last part of this historical analysis I turn to the development of Lao towns. Up until the twentieth century the size of Lao towns not unnaturally mirrored the prosperity of the whole country. There is no way of estimating accurately the population of Vientiane at the height of Setthathirath's or Souligna Vongsa's reign, but it must have been considerable and perhaps comparable to today's. Division, defeat and poverty saw the towns abandoned and a return to subsistence farming. The state to which the nation had fallen by the

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1. 'Middle peasants' are "a peasant population which has secure access to land of its own and cultivates it with family labor" (Wolf (1973) p. 291).

2. See Appendix 1.

end of the nineteenth century is well indicated by the fact that Luang Prabang was certainly the only town of more than 5,000 inhabitants in the entire country, and possibly the figure could be reduced to nearer 2,000 without exaggeration.[1]

Towns in Laos were a reflection of the presence of surplus wealth. A certain amount might be generated by a series of good harvests reaped in peaceful circumstances which allowed opportunities for trading, but the prime source of urban wealth was conquest and the resulting tributes. As will be discussed later (Chapter Six), Lao concepts of kingship gave great importance to the site from which the kingdom was governed, but the possibilities for embellishment of that site were limited if the resources of only a small scattered population were to be relied on. The extent to which great kings and emperors relied on the payment of tribute (and the capture of prisoners for slaves to maintain the magnificence of their courts can be gauged by looking at the lists of goods which some tributes comprised.[2]

The growth of Lao towns in the twentieth century, however, has ceased to reflect the nation's prosperity. We have seen that in 1943 60% of the urban population was Vietnamese, and the growth of the Mekong river towns was a consequence of, and a means of ensuring, colonial domination. Although I shall maintain that the Lao have an important

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1. Barthelémy (1898) gives Luang Prabang a population of 15,000, but notes that Pallegoix (1976) writing in 1854 gave a population of 80,000, which he considers not impossible considering the large areas of the city already returned to forest during the rapid decline of the late nineteenth century.

2. For helping Sai-Ong-Hue to capture the throne vacated by Souligna Vongsa, the Emperor at Hue in 1696 demanded every three years:- 400 bars of silver, ten elephants, ten pairs of ivory tusks, ten rhinoceros horns, etc. etc.

tradition of urban living which is linked with ideas of nationhood, only Luang Prabang has preserved an unbroken tradition, while Vientiane today is only partly a conscious attempt at revival. Thakkek, Savannakhet and Pakse, and to a large extent Vientiane, are French towns built with Vietnamese participation to control administration and commerce among the Lao who remained rural agriculturalists. It was only from 1950 that these towns began to attract significant Lao populations. While this extremely rapid expansion of the Lao urban population did reflect an increase in prosperity in the towns themselves, it was, as we shall see, largely unconnected to conditions in the countryside, and was therefore desperately fragile. In 1975 prosperity once again disappeared as suddenly as it had arrived, and the towns which had become dependent on foreign support for their survival were left to fend for themselves. Inevitably they will have to die before they are reborn.

Geography[1]

Laos has a surface area of 91,428 square miles, which makes it roughly the size of Great Britain. It is landlocked and is bordered by Burma and China to the north, Vietnam to the east, Cambodia to the south and Thailand to the west, although the frontiers with Vietnam and Thailand are the most significant since the country is long in a north-south direction (625 miles) and narrow from west to east (only 70 miles wide at Thakkek). Over half the size of Vietnam, Laos has only about one-fifteenth of its population. Recent population estimates are based

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1. There is no standard economic geography of Laos, but general introductions to the subject can be found in Halpern (1964a), LeBar and Suddard (1960) and Whitaker (1972). More specialised treatment of particular areas or topics is contained in Inthavong (1970), Labarthe (1969), Loupy (1972), Mogenet (1973a), Taillard (1971) and Yang Dao (1972).

on slim evidence, but we can guess at a present total of between three and three and a half million, as against 50 million for Vietnam.

Main features

(a) Rivers

The principal geographic feature of Laos is the Mekong river, which runs through the country for about 1,100 miles from the northern border with Burma down to the falls of Khone and the Cambodian frontier. For much of its length it forms the border between Laos and Thailand, although this, as has already been noted, is a political accident which separates two geographically similar areas inhabited by the same ethnic group.

The Mekong is fuelled by a succession of tributaries of varying importance running down from the mountains to the north and east. Of these the Nam Ou, which flows north-south through Phong Saly province to join the Mekong just north of Luang Prabang, the Nam Ngum, which rises in Xieng Khouang, flows through the Vientiane plain and has its juncture east of Vientiane, and the Se Bang Fai and Se Bang Hien, which come down from the Annamite chain to join the Mekong north and south of Savannakhet respectively, are perhaps the most important. But all Lao rivers are of significance in determining the way of life of its peoples as they are at once sources of water, energy and food, and a major communications system.

(b) Mountains

While the Mekong river forms most of the frontier with Thailand, the watershed of a long north-south range of mountains known as the Annamite chain separates Laos from Vietnam. In the south of the country a strip of valley land separates the Mekong from the Annamite

chain, this strip widening around Savannakhet into a substantial rice-growing plain. East of Pakse a high fertile plateau, the Bolovens plateau, provides good plantation land before the mountainous border area is reached.

The northern part of the country has a considerably more complex relief dominated by sharply sculpted mountain formations running generally North-East to South-West, but occasionally interlaced with N-W to S-E patterns. The Mekong itself forces a tortuous, often narrow, path through this difficult terrain with steep gorges interspersed by small valleys. The few flat areas of any size in the north have attracted Lao sedentary rice cultivators. The most notable of these are the Vientiane plain, formed from the valley of the Nam Ngum and its confluence with the Mekong (described in detail in Chapter Four) and the high undulating plateau of Xieng Khouang, more commonly known as the Plain of Jars, which enjoys an almost temperate climate, not particularly good for rice-growing, but well adapted to grazing cattle and growing fruit and vegetables.

(c) Climate

The country lies between latitudes 13.9°N and 22.5°N, and enjoys a tropical monsoon climate, distinguished by a hot wet monsoon period from May to September and a dry cooler period from October to April, although the temperature in January can occasionally drop below freezing in the northern mountains while it can reach over 40° centigrade in the valley areas during April.

The climate in the tropical valleys is generally debilitating, featuring as it does great extremes of heat and cold and a long hot humid monsoon period during which the most important agricultural work must be undertaken. The valley dweller is particularly prone to

malaria and to intestinal parasites, both of which are endemic. Despite recent progress in medical care and increased awareness of hygiene rules, life expectancy is still low and infant mortality high.

Some of the minority peoples, particularly the Hmong, escape the extremes of heat and danger of malaria on the crests of the mountains in the north where they are established. Some observers claim that these peoples are physically incapable of living in the lowland areas, though this has been disproved, not surprisingly, by the successful introduction of some Hmong to wet-rice cultivation in the lowlands of Sayaboury province. There is no doubt, however, that in the absence of preventive medicine and generalised knowledge of hygiene rules, the climate which the Lao has to endure is liable to subject him to frequent illness and early death.

Resources

(a) Forests

The impression gained from flying over many parts of Laos is of one great, occasionally interrupted, forest. Even in the past ten years, however, this impression has been considerably reduced in certain areas, for two main reasons. First, merchants discovered the enormous profits to be made from timber, and in the areas controlled by the Royal Lao Government the principal industrial activity from 1960 to 1975 was logging. The government, however, was unwilling or unable to enforce any controls or replanting schemes. It was essentially a quick profit operation in which every possible stand of precious hard wood was taken. Secondly, the war reduced the areas in which the minority peoples could make a living from slash-and-burn agriculture and in several regions, under increasing pressure of population, they found themselves quite

unable to allow the normal fallow interval between croppings. Every last ounce had to be squeezed out of the soil. The result was that the secondary growth failed to come and regenerate the soil, the rains brought erosion, and whole tracts of recently virgin forest will now take many years to regenerate any kind of life.

The potential, however, of the Lao forests is immense. The problem, as we shall see with all Lao resources, is the high cost of exploitation, and particularly transport. The best wood from accessible areas has already gone. The investment in infrastructure and equipment needed to run a viable forestry programme is now considerable.

Laos has also regularly exported small quantities of subsidiary forest products, like the resinous gum sticklac and benzoin, which are less difficult to transport. With increasing insecurity and deforestation even this trade has declined to almost nothing in recent years.

(b) Minerals

Only the most basic surveys of mineral resources have been undertaken, although the potential for mineral exploitation was one of the strong arguments used by early French explorers to justify French expenditure on colonisation. The only industrial exploitation at present is of tin near Thakkek and salt at Ban Keun in the Vientiane plain. Precious and semi-precious stones are reported around Houei Sai, there is abundant iron ore in Xieng Khouang, and there is a suggestion there might be oil or gas near Savannakhet. To date the high cost of capital investment, military insecurity, difficulties involved in transportation and problems of exporting through a third country have deterred all investors from serious efforts, although there is clearly good long-term potential.

(c) Soils

It is estimated that only about 8% of the surface area of the country or 7,300 square miles, is at present suitable for cultivation. The Mekong valley lands have alluvial soils suitable for wet-rice cultivation which are periodically renewed by exceptional flooding of the Mekong or its tributaries. The fertility of these soils therefore varies, but is never as great as those of the Thai Central Plain around Bangkok, for example.

In the Xieng Khouang plateau the land is not well suited for rice growing (the soils are too porous), but supports grasses suitable for cattle grazing, and on the surrounding hill sides temperate fruit trees can be grown successfully. On the Bolovens plateau in the south a sub-tropical climate provides good conditions for growing tea and coffee and other plantation crops such as cotton or rubber.

(d) Hydro-electricity

Potentially one of the most exciting sources of revenue and energy is through hydro-electric schemes. So far lack of funds has restricted construction to the Nam Ngum dam on the Vientiane plain, but current from there is already being sold to Thailand and its capacity is presently being expanded by the installation of new generators. Still on the drawing board is a scheme for a dam at Pa Mong on the Mekong just west of Vientiane, which would be one of the most ambitious undertaken anywhere in the world. Doubts about the effect of such an enormous installation on the Mekong river ecology, on the populations to be displaced, and indeed about the need to generate so much power in that area, may mean that the scheme will eventually be abandoned in favour of more modest and less alarming projects on some of the tributaries of the Mekong in the south of Laos.

Population

With the study of population we come up against one of the most intractable problems facing the student of Laos and its society: the lack of reliable statistics. Population estimates made by the French in the early years of the century certainly err on the low side, since the same head-count was used as a basis for the levy of taxation, and village headmen therefore kept their official village population figures as low as possible. French figures obtained in this way give the national population as 819,000 in 1921, which is surely an under-estimate.

Since independence in 1954 there has still been no national census, primarily owing to military instability which denied access to some areas to representatives of the administration in Vientiane. Secondly, even had peace prevailed, the problems of counting a scattered, sometimes 'semi-nomadic'[1] population were far beyond the capabilities of the young independent bureaucracy to solve. The official Bulletin Statistique du Laos therefore relies on figures extrapolated from partial surveys made in 1958, adds 30% for under-reporting by village headmen, assumes a standard rate of increase throughout the country of 2.4% per annum and adjusts its population estimates each year accordingly. By this method the official population figure for 1973 was found to be 3,181,000.[2] The results take no account, therefore, of the war-related migrations from province to province and into and out of the country, nor of varying rates of natural increase. Nor is there any

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1. I use the term 'semi-nomadic' to describe the migration patterns of those groups who do not normally establish permanent villages, but are clearly not nomads. The most obvious example is the Hmong, who may move quite large distances once every five to ten years or so. Some Mon-Khmer speaking groups can be similarly classified.

2. Royaume du Laos (1973).

guarantee that the figures on which the whole exercise is based were remotely accurate in the first place. So the margins for error end up as quite enormous by modern standards. Good arguments could certainly be put forward for estimating the present population anywhere between 2.4 million and 4 million, or to put it another way 3,200,000 $\pm$ 25%. For the purposes of calculations such as population density etc., I therefore assume a population of 3,200,000.

Despite these problems a number of significant points can nevertheless be made about the population and its distribution. Areas having the highest population density are all along the banks of the Mekong river, specifically the rice-growing plains of Vientiane and Savannakhet. In general terms the ethnic Lao live in higher density lowland Mekong valley areas where they are sedentary rice cultivators. The minorities, who may make up in total 50% of the national population, are in the majority in all those provinces which do not touch the Mekong (Attopeu, Saravane, Xieng Khouang, Sam Neua and Phong Saly). They live predominantly in low density upland settlements. The overall national population density is about 35 per square mile, which is the lowest in Asia, but ranges from 120 per square mile in the Vientiane plain to roughly 20 per square mile in the province of Phong Saly.

Whatever the precise numbers, the Lao population is clearly very young. Life expectancy remains low (estimated in 1970 at 35 at birth[1]), and infant mortality high, although this is being reduced, particularly around the urban centres. Surveys suggest that in 1967 as many as 57% of the urban population were under 20. Comparable figures would be lower in the rural areas.

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1. Whitaker (1972) p. 23.

As noted above, the spectacular rise in urban population from 51,150 in 1943 (about 3% of the population) to 400,000 in 1973 (12.5% of the population) was fuelled not only from rural-urban migration encouraged by the war and by the wealth being dispensed in these new towns, but by substantial immigration of Lao from North-East Thailand As economic conditions have worsened since 1974, many of these migrant have returned to their original villages in Thailand.

Human adaptation to the environment

Chapter Five below is a study of the economic aspects of urban growth and of the modernisation of the rural economy. As such it is an extended essay on the way in which the Lao is adapting and modifyin his relationship with the natural environment. It nevertheless seem appropriate at this point to give a brief preview of the ways in which the various sectors of Lao society exploit their natural surroundings.

(a) The Lao

The rural-dwelling ethnic Lao is predominantly a sedentary wet rice subsistence farmer, a middle peasant, cultivating with the labour of his own family a plot of inherited paddy land flooded once a year by monsoon rains. He supplements his diet with fishing, hunting, vegetable growing, gathering wild fruit and roots and raising livestoc He lives in villages whose size and lay-out reflect the local geograph (a line of houses along a river bank, a compact group around a well in the flat plain). Specialists in arts and crafts of all kinds (spirit doctors, carpenters, metal-workers, musicians) are to be found in most villages, as are those who engage in commerce. Ideally the Lao peasa can meet almost all his needs from the area of land over which his village claims control.

In recent years this self-perpetuating cycle has been altered by a number of factors, such as population increase, mass education, technical innovations, migration, war and the growth of towns. Later chapters examine the effects of these changes in detail.

(b) Ethnic minorities

Among the minority peoples three main groups can be distinguished (i) Tai-speaking minorities; (ii) Mon-Khmer speakers; and (iii) Sino Tibetan speakers. Each group, although consisting of numerous sub-groups, has certain common features in its economic geography.

(i) Tai speakers

The principal Tai-speaking groups are the Black Tai and White Tai inhabiting the border area of north-west Vietnam and north-east Laos, the Lu, (lū') whose pre-colonial kingdoms the Sipsongpanna ("12,000 rice-fields") and the Sipsongchautai ("12 Tai princedoms") stretched from the Thai-Burma border areas across northern Laos and southern Yunnan into northern Vietnam, and the Yuan, found predominantly in Sayaboury province, who are the majority ethnic group of large parts of northern Thailand.

While the Lu and the Yuan have retained culturally specific customs and linguistic features, their Buddhist religion and subsistence wet rice economy mean that their relationship with the environment is essentially no different from that of the Lao, and they integrate easily, almost indistinguishably to an outsider, with their majority neighbours. The Black Thai resemble other Tai-speakers in the region in that they are sedentary wet rice cultivators, but they have not accepted Buddhism and have a strong patrilineal descent system.

In terms of basic economic activity, therefore, the Tai-speaking

minorities of Laos (with a few minor exceptions) can be classed with the Lao as lowland sedentary subsistence wet rice cultivators. The government coined the term Lao Lum, meaning 'lowland Lao' to refer to this whole group, including Lao speakers.

(ii) Mon-Khmer speakers

As Tai speakers are Lao Lum, Mon-Khmer speakers are 'Lao Theung', (lao thoeng) 'Upland Lao', a term the government introduced to replace if possible - the insulting Kha ('slave') by which ethnic Lao commonly referred to these people.

Although there are a great many different sub-groups (probably at least 40 languages are spoken), the Lao Theung are generally swidden rice farmers, that is, they use the slash-and-burn technique of agriculture which involves cutting the forest, burning it and planting the rice seeds in holes made with a stake. The ashes from the fire provide a natural fertiliser. The problem is that one piece of cleared land can usually only be used for a maximum of two seasons, and must then be left fallow for ten to twenty years depending on the soil, the steepness of the slope and other factors. Where a Lao Theung village has control over enough land, it can become a permanent site, with a regular rotation cycle of say fifteen years governing the use of each parcel of land.

Among some of the groups in northern Laos, particularly the most numerous group called Khmu, a gradual loss of traditional arts and crafts has taken place over the centuries, a trend which they themselv (and objective reasoning) suggest results from the dominance of the lowland Lao. Weaving has almost died out, for instance, since their Lao neighbours insist that the Lao Theung buy finished cloth from them and refuse to sell them cotton.

In the south, where Lao dominance is not so pronounced, traditional arts and crafts among important groups like the Loven are better preserved.

Subsidiary food is obtained from hunting, gathering and vegetable gardening, and items like salt are had through barter exchange with the Lao who accept the forest products collected by the Lao Theung.

As indicated above, the Lao Theung peoples are capable of living in a balanced relationship with their natural environment, providing that overcrowding does not force them to abandon the normal rotation cycle for use of their swidden fields. This is of course precisely what has been happening in recent years, as war-induced migrations and declining infant mortality have led to population pressure on certain regions of the country. Caught in this predicament the Lao Theung villager is forced literally to devastate his environment in order to survive.

(iii) Sino-Tibetan speakers

It is not at all certain that the ecologist's conclusions on the life-style of the various Sino-Tibetan speaking groups would be so generous. The Hmong are the largest and most important of these grou with the Mien a notable second. The reason for the doubt is that although these groups practise the same kind of swidden farming as the Lao Theung, they migrate, usually over considerable distances, once every five or ten years. While this practice does not guarantee a more destructive relationship with the environment, it means first tha they are not constrained in their use of land by the constant reminder that they will have to use it again in 15 years time, and secondly that they cut down virgin primary forest far more often than the Lao Theung, who, established on a more or less permanent site, for the mos

part slash-and-burn secondary forest.

The term given by the Lao authorities to classify the Sino-Tibetan speakers is Lao Sung ('Lao of the heights'), from the fact that they establish themselves on the crests and ridges of mountain ranges. The first migrations of Lao Sung into Laos seem to have taken place in the mid-nineteenth century. Under pressure in southern China, where they are still numerous, groups of Hmong began moving down onto the largely uninhabited mountains of northern Thailand, northern Laos and northwestern Vietnam (Tonkin). A skill of crucial importance which they brought with them was growing the opium poppy.[1] This practice has been the source of their relative wealth and has given them an importance in the modern history of Laos out of all proportion to their numbers.[2] Besides their relative wealth, Hmong social organisation in patrilineal clan groups makes political unity and common action easier to organise than among the often leaderless Lao Theung groups. Also, where the Lao Theung attitude in the north of Laos seems to have been one of submission to ethnic Lao superiority, the Hmong have a long tradition of resistance to Chinese attempts to integrate them into a Chinese political and cultural community.

Somewhat cavalier destruction of the national forests by the Hmong and their cultivation of the opium poppy have made them prime targets for resettlement programmes, voluntary or forced, under all recent administrations. These considerations, when combined with their

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1. cf. McCoy (1972).

2. Estimates of the Lao Sung population of Laos diverge probably more than any others - from 200,000 to 500,000. Somewhere in the middle is probably realistic, although very large numbers have now fled into Thailand. (See Appendix 1.)

tradition of fierce cultural and political independence, make it relatively unsurprising that they have been the group to suffer more than any other, both during the war and now in the early years of peace, as thousands of their number languish in refugee camps, and others are resettled in inhospitable environments.

Conclusion

Like its history, the geography of Laos is an elaborate mesh of interacting forces, evolving this way and that under the influence of various pressures. While the geography student may be frustrated in his attempts to capture its essence or to describe every detail of its complexity, the relatively small population of the country and the so far unsophisticated nature of its economy do mean that the anthropolog can hope to grasp many of the elements that make up the overall picture Where the study of modernisation and urban growth in Vietnam, for example, might leave one floundering in a mass of huge population figures whose significance could hardly be discerned, in the study of Laos one is never far from the individual people involved and their rather simple everyday activities.

CHAPTER THREE THE LITERATURE ON LAO SOCIETY

There is as yet no accepted standard monograph on Lao society or the Lao people. Indeed what literature does exist is often both difficult to obtain and of uneven quality. Of all aspects of Lao society and culture, only two have been relatively well served by Western writers: political history and religion. References to the main works of political history can be found in Chapter Two, and a brief review of the works on Lao religion is at the end of this chapter. In view of the omissions in other fields, I have thought it important to make a fairly extensive review of the available literature on Lao society in this chapter. By introducing some of the main sociological ideas used by other writers and offering a preliminary critique of them, I aim to prepare the ground for the presentation of my own fieldwork in later chapters. In addition, this review of the literature will enable me to present a somewhat more complete picture of Lao society as a whole than would otherwise have been possible within the limited focus of this thesis. While my aim in the following chapters is to look specifically at the developing relationship between town and village in the 1960s and 1970s, and to discuss the social changes promoted by rural-urban migration, the reader may well come to this study with no previous knowledge of Laos and its people. The review which follows is therefore intended to provide some basic background material, and to give an idea of how a number of other writers have approached the study of Lao society.

Introduction

The bulk of writing about Lao society is by either French or American scholars. The Lao themselves have concentrated on works of

religious and historical scholarship, literature and traditional customs. Lately, however, a number of Lao students have produced theses on particular aspects of the Lao economy or society.

In a note in the previous chapter I quoted Archaimbault's opinion of the reliability of Lao historical chronicles. In fact the chronicles were put together primarily to 'prove' the legitimacy of the king or prince who sponsored them. They therefore frequently ada historical facts to suit their purpose. Inevitably Lao histories, suc as the History of Laos by Maha Sila Viravong[1] suffer the consequences as much as Le Boulanger's work[2] or that of other foreign writers.

Lao literature has been transmitted first and foremost through oral tradition. However, efforts have been made, principally by the government's Comité Littéraire (kom vannakadī), to make available in printed form some of the most popular works, either direct from the oral tradition or from rare surviving manuscripts. These works are mainly inspired by the Jataka tales (stories of the previous lives of the Buddha), by the Ramayana epic, or by pre-Buddhist legends often associated with particular localities. A few have been produced in French translation.[3]

Parallel to this effort to make the best Lao literature known among modern youth was a move to preserve for posterity details of traditional Lao customs which it was feared were being abandoned, and to link this to general instruction in Lao moral philosophy. Typical was a book which appeared in Lao in 1969 entitled Paphēnī burān

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1. Viravong (1964).
2. Le Boulanger (1931).
3. e.g. Nginn (1966), Pangkham (1965).

(Ancient traditions)[1] which gives a detailed account of the principal annual ceremonies. Other books have appeared giving suggested texts for recitation on different occasions, such as the various types of sũ khuan (invitation to the souls). These had previously been handed down entirely by oral tradition. As a further example, Nginn produced a book in both French and Lao entitled Politesse Lao.[2]

From among the older generation of French-educated Lao scholars (those receiving their education around the time of the Second World War) there emerged a number of short descriptive studies of features of Lao society and culture. Titles such as Les fêtes profanes et religieuses au Laos,[3] Rites de la mort et des funérailles,[4] The Khene-maker,[5] and Le Code de Vientiane[6] give an idea of what was involved. It has been only in recent years, however, that young Lao scholars have started to make genuinely analytical studies of features of their society. Inevitably, owing to the terms of the scholarships they received, and the obvious priority needs of their country, the majority of these works were in fields such as agriculture, medicine, education and development economics. There was little impetus for sociological enquiry, and most of these academic studies for foreign universities remain in thesis or dissertation form, and have never been published. Among the most interesting in the field of economics are two treating different aspects of recent Lao economic development, by Pane Rassavong and Yang Dao.[7]

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1. Comité Littéraire (1969).
2. Nginn (1965b).
3. Nginn (1967).
4. Abhay (1951).
5. Kene (1956).
6. Phimmasone (1970-72).
7. Rassavong (1965), Yang Dao (1972).

Despite the long standing connections of France with Laos, French study of Lao society remains surprisingly patchy. Three competent general studies had appeared before the First World War, Tournier's Notice sur le Laos Français (1900), Reinach's Le Laos (1911) and the remarkable seven volumes of Pavie's Mission Pavie en Indochine 1879-1895 (1911). Also a product of this period was Finot's work on Lao literature.[1] From 1911 until 1951, however, when France-Asie published its collection of diverse contributions entitled Présence du Royaume Lao, only the appearance of Le Boulanger' Histoire du Laos Français of 1931 interrupted 40 relatively barren years for publications about the Lao. Such a gap reflected the French government's assessment of Laos at the time as simply a convenient back-stop to its other Indo-Chinese possessions.

After the Second World War, with the improvement of communication Laos inevitably commanded more attention, even before its entry onto the international stage at the Geneva conference of 1954. Pre-eminen among French students of the Lao during this period was Charles Archaimbault, who has, however, limited himself to the study of religious and secular cults, myth and history. His work in these fields has been masterly, but is not directly concerned with contemporary Lao life. To fill this gap there is a growing corpus of work by younger French social scientists, particularly geographers (Taillar Mogenet) and students of ethnic minorities (Lemoine, Wall). Only Georges Condominas, for whom Laos is a secondary interest, and Pierre-Sylvain Doré have made studies of the Lao which can readily be described as contemporary social anthropology.[2] For the rest there

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1. Finot (1917).

2. cf. Taillard (1971), Mogenet (1973), Lemoine (1972), Wall (1975) Condominas (1962, 1968, 1975) and Doré (1972a, 1972b).

are numerous articles on specific aspects of Lao life and culture, such as the law of land tenure (Suryadhay et al), traditional medicine (Pottier) and various cultural phenomena (Lafont, Lévy).[1]

American work has tended to be a rather hasty response to a sudden United States government interest in the country. The result has been a number of general introductions to Lao society such as Halpern (1964a, 1964b), Lebar and Suddard (1967), and Whitaker (1972). In addition several studies of village life have been presented in brief preliminary form, such as Kaufman (1961) and Ayabe (1960), and a few village studies have been made by non-anthropologists.[2]

Most of the general studies of Lao society produced in the 1960s by American writers suffer either from having been written by committees with too little information at their disposal, such as Lebar and Suddard (1967) Laos, its People, its Society, its Culture and Whitaker et al (1972) Laos, or from trying to cover too many topics within a small framework, as in Halpern's (1964) Economy and Society of Laos. The result is that, while each book provides a useful superficial view of Lao society, none contains any penetrating analysis, and all tend towards banal generalisations of little value, as well as descrip tions of aspects of social life which they have no space to explain. Perhaps the most perspicacious remark in all these volumes is reserved for the last page of Halpern's work:

> "Americans, Chinese, French, Japanese, Thai and Vietnamese have all participated in trying to control and change the lives of the peoples of Laos and, in this endeavor, have received help or 'supervision' from Canadians, English, Indians, Poles and Russians. It would seem that seldom in world history has such a large and varied company meddled in the lives of so few".[3]

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1. Suryadhay, Condominas, Granier and Taillard (1971), Pottier (1972 Lafont (1962, 1969, 1971), Lévy (1940, 1943).

2. e.g. Branfman (n.d.), Evans (1971).

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'Loose Social Structure' analysis

J.M. Halpern is in fact the most prolific writer on Lao society in the English language and in addition to two monographs and a number of articles, he has edited a series called the Laos Project Papers (see Bibliography). Where his Economy and Society of Laos is disappointingly superficial, his Government, Politics and Social Structure (1964b) is a worthy attempt to disengage Lao political life around 1960 from the instant judgments of cold war analysts. The book isolates a number of elements, often misunderstood, which have contributed to the continual instability of the country and which I develop in Chapter Six. Halpern shows how, on the attainment of political independence, Laos was saddled with an administrative and military organisation which it could not afford and which American aid encouraged it to expand. He describes the way the traditional elite, pressed to take over the running of a modern state, simply failed to develop the institutional or philosophical framework in which this could effectively be done. The Pathet Lao, on the other hand, having developed popular support as a result of a commitment to ideological change, had not so far demonstrated its ability to implement or even devise practical programmes which could run the country:

> "In a sense the Royal Lao Government has been operating in a world which no longer exists, and the Pathet Lao are operating in terms of a social structure still to come".[1]

The Royal Government failed because (a) it did not take account of the ethnic minorities which constituted half the population, (b) it

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1. Halpern (1964b) p. 173.

had an ambivalent relationship with Buddhist monks, and (c) it never responded to the needs of villagers at the local level. In the end it was the elite's failure to move out from the relationships of traditional government, fatally altered by the injection of huge amounts of money, which caused its downfall:

> "In essence the massive American aid program has inevitably brought about the virtual collapse of the very thing it sought to preserve, namely the traditional system of values and authority".[1]

Halpern's analysis of emerging political relationships is perceptive and still relevant in understanding modern political and social developments, but it is, in my view, seriously flawed in one respect. He explains the Lao inability to mould a modern state by referring among other things to its 'loosely structured social system'. Now this notion of 'loose structure', launched by Embree in 1950, is surely the most unfortunate thing to happen to the sociology of Tai societies. Not only has it been "applied with great relief to explain aspects of the Thai scene that do not fit the writer's model", but it has bedevilled even the writings of those sociologists who have quite rightly rejected the idea as inapplicable, since they have been obliged to construct elaborate explanations as to why it is wrong, rather than spend their time on a positive and relevant analysis of Tai societies. Halpern writes:

> "What we have termed flexibility in Lao society is almost synonymous with a loosely structured social system. In such a system westerners are struck by the lack of regularity, discipline and regimentation",[3]

thus confusing the way in which individuals interact within a system

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1. Ibid., p. 174.

2. Evers (1969) p. 1.

3. Halpern, op.cit., p. 71.

with the structure of the system itself. Indeed Halpern goes on to give pages of evidence of the Lao social system's exceptional tightness of structure. He notes the complex ranking system within the traditional government apparatus and the keen awareness of superior/inferior relationships. It is a pity that he should succumb to the confusion sown by a supremely inappropriate concept.

Unfortunately the concept of 'loose social structure' seriously impedes intelligent analysis in two studies of village life in the Vientiane Plain by other anthropologists included in Halpern's Laos Project Papers. Kaufman's Village Life in Vientiane province (1961) and Ayabe's The Village of Ban Pha Khao, Vientiane province (1960) bot use the concept and suffer for it.

Kaufman begins his three pages on 'Social Organisation' with the sentence, "Social organisation is loosely structured."[1] but then goes on to describe one of the most interesting categories of Lao social relationships, that of 'siu' (sīu), whose importance arises precisely from the fact that it is the only relationship of absolute equality in a Lao's life.[2] All other relationships are characterised in terms of superior/inferior. Thus there is no kinship term implying equal rank such as our 'brother', 'sister' or 'cousin', and the only way of fashioning one is to put one superior and one inferior term together, thereby forming a plural. So the word for sisters is ū'ai nǭng (elder sister, younger sister). Far from being 'loosely structu Lao society consists of an infinite set of hierarchical relationships. Indeed Pierre Doré makes an interesting case for a structuralist analy of the Lao social system in terms of pairs of superiors and inferiors,

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1. Kaufman (1961) p. 18.

2. This relationship, a sort of 'blood brotherhood' is discussed in Chapter Seven.

thus: parents/children; husband/wife; teacher/student; employer/employee; noble/commoner; monk/layman; elder/younger.[1]

Kaufman also tends towards facile generalisations (applied to village life in the whole of Vientiane province) such as "Hard-boiled eggs are served once a week", and "400 kip a month are spent on groceries".[2] Ayabe, however, introduces some interesting ideas, such as the clash between conservative and progressive groups within the village, the bases for the formation of co-operative labour groups, and the lack of formal classes within the Lao village, but either he deals with each point only peremptorily or he is pushed off the track by the ugly head of 'loose social structure':

> "the overlapping division of labour at Ban Pha Khao again indicates the looseness of the social structure"[3]

or when he notes that villagers are able to 'rank' individual household heads in a hierarchical order "even in this loosely structured village

Both these points could have introduced useful discussions of features of Lao social organisation, but 'loose structure' hinders further thought. The use of the concept in the work of Halpern, Ayabe and Kaufman means that while they provide interesting information on Lao cultural and economic practices, they never really analyse how these practices fit into a wider scheme of things. For a more detailed analysis of the weaknesses of the concept, J.A. Niels Mulder (1969) is one who has attacked it comprehensively. For myself its use is evidence of an outsider's bewilderment at a society in which

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1. Doré (1972a) p. 73.
2. Kaufman (1961) p. 40.
3. Ayabe (1960) p. 27.
4. Ibid., p. 33.

wide individual variations in behaviour are not only sanctioned but expected, thus leading observers to confuse structure with the types of behaviour permitted within the society.

Laissez faire and productivity analyses

More successful studies of village life in the Vientiane Plain have been produced by Condominas and Taillard. Condominas' (1962) Essai sur la société rurale de la région de Vientiane, taken together with his study of rural religion[1] and his article on Phī Bañ cults[2] comprise perhaps the most stimulating study available on modern Lao rural society. Here I shall confine myself to discussion of his remarks in the first 30 pages of the Essai on the general nature of Lao society and on patterns of land tenure.

Condominas considers the two most striking features of Lao rural society to be (a) the absence of real social stratification within the village, and (b) the vat (the Buddhist temple), symbol and centre of the community. The absence of social stratification is considered typical of a society which he finds "remarkable for its tolerance", flexible, democratic, and most especially "impregnated in some way with what we have called the philosophy of bō̤ pen nyang .... a very elaborate philosophy of gentleness and 'laissez faire'"[3] (p. 1).

Bō̤ pen nyang can be translated roughly 'never mind' or 'it doesn't matter', and Condominas sees the 'philosophy of the bō̤ pen nyang'as central to the understanding of Lao society. He even states

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1. Condominas (1968).
2. Condominas (1975), discussed in Chapter Six.
3. Condominas (1962) p. 1.

that the unsystematic nature of Lao kinship patterns is part of "the system of bɔ̄ pen nyang"[1] in Lao society.

There is a danger here that, much as other anthropologists have used 'loose social structure' to explain problematic areas of Thai society, so Condominas turns to bɔ̄ pen nyang as an explanation for apparent imprecision in social organisation. In fact bɔ̄ pen nyang cannot be considered in isolation from the concept of piap[2] ('prestige and it frequently has the sense not of 'never mind', but rather of 'I shan't make an issue out of it this time', which can hardly be categorised as 'laissez-faire'.

The problem seems to me to be principally a failure to distinguis between the 'ideal' and the 'everyday': what people believe should happen, and what in fact takes place. In the terms of my analysis in Chapters Six and Seven, there is a need to differentiate between ideology, expectations and practice. The ideal is enshrined in proverbs, sayings, myth and ritual, and from it are derived the principles of social organisation. Thus, for example, a man may marry his cousin from a junior branch of the family but not from the senior. This 'rule' may be disregarded in practice. The ideology remains intact; the practice allows flexibility. However, the ideal cannot be flouted with impunity. If the marriage breaks up in divorce the village elders will analyse informally the reasons for the marriage failure. Inevitably a breach of social norms, such as taking a wife from a senior line, will be cited as a probable contributory factor. In other words, even though the breach of the ideal was 'allowed' by the elders themselves at the time, they will have remarked on the

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1. Ibid., p. 2.
2. See below, p. 91.

dangers involved and may even have forecast an early breakdown.

Condominas' study of land tenure points out two features of rural society in the Vientiane plain of great importance to an understanding of modern Lao society as a whole. The first is the continued lack of population pressure on land. Although by the early 1970s parts of the Vientiane plain were beginning to feel some pressure, particularly in the areas used for the resettlement of refugees, the effects of this pressure on land tenure were only just beginning to be felt. Up until very recently, then, few people owned land which they themselves did not cultivate, and as a result, in a rural economy with few significant cash crops, wealth differentiation within the village was small. Condominas writes that differences in wealth were so small, and the opportunities for all to acquire equivalent wealth were such, that the prestige a man obtained from his comparative wealth came less from the few material possessions on which his wealth rested than on the qualities of hard work and enterprise which its accumulation certainly represented.[1] In 1962 Condominas was still able to conclude, which he could not have done in 1974, that in rural Laos "all wealth still rests on the rice-field".[2] In Chapter Five I show how the modernisation of the rural economy since 1962 has brought steadily increasing wealth differentiation, and new sources of wealth to individual rural families.

The second feature brought out by Condominas is the disintegration in the early nineteenth century of the traditional political infrastructure. From 1828, when Chao Anou, the last king of Vientiane, was defeated, until the reunification of Laos under the kings of Luang

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1. Ibid., p. 15.
2. Ibid., p. 12.

Prabang in 1954, the Plain of Vientiane had no traditional political authority above the village level. Condominas suggests this may explain the lack of any feeling (such as would exist in Luang Prabang) that the land is the property of the King and that the peasantry merely has rights of permanent usufruct. I would go further and suggest that this feature of Lao society in the Vientiane plain helps to explain wide differences in ceremonial practices from village to village, the lack of agreement as to the details of the customary law of land tenure, and the clear pre-eminence of the spatially unified village as a political, economic, and even social unit. These are features of a society which for many decades had no functioning political hierarchy or system of taxation, virtually no religious hierarchy and therefore no education system (traditional education took place in the vat).

The village in the Vientiane Plain has been for some time therefor an autonomous subsistence unit in the widest sense. Not only in the Vientiane area, however, was the political infrastructure shaky during the nineteenth century. Even in Luang Prabang, whose royal family survived better than any other the upheavals caused by Ho pirates, the exigencies of Siamese kings and the ripples of colonial conflict, the king was several times forced to flee the capital, and can only have had intermittent control over surrounding villages.

The second important study, Taillard's (1971) Les Berges de la Nam Ngum et du Mekong is an economic geography of village life on the banks of the Nam Ngum and the Mekong rivers. It is the result of thorough first-hand research and is worth discussing in some detail, since it brings out a number of important points about the economics of village life in the Vientiane Plain. Unfortunately it is marred by one fundamental error. While not-ing that a Lao peasant's evaluation of

priorities may be in terms of social or spiritual criteria, rather than the strictly materialist values of the western economist, Taillard nevertheless assesses the 'productivity' of Lao villagers in purely economic terms. If the intention were to change the peasant's attitude, the calculation would be justified, but Taillard claims throughout that 'traditional values' must be respected. If this is the aim, then 'productivity' must be evaluated in Lao terms, not purely in terms of the profitability of each economic activity according to current market values. His definition of 'underemployment' as "days spent on insufficiently productive activities such as hunting or gathering in the river bank economy and all forms of disguised pleasures",[1] is a good example of the problem. Who has decided what is 'an insufficiently productive activity'? It was certainly not the 'traditional Lao values' Taillard claims to respect.

The main body of the work is subdivided into four: (1) The physical and human milieu, (2) Agricultural life, (3) Rural economy: village accounting in terms of cash value of activities, (4) Rural economy: village accounting in terms of the time spent on activities.

After a good introduction to the physical milieu and a superficial treatment of 'the human milieu', there follows a useful enumeration of the various agricultural activities and a discussion of land tenure. It is in the third section that Taillard presents his survey data and comes to a number of conclusions which provide a background to my treatment of the rural economy in Chapter Five. Briefly summarised, he shows that the Mekong villages are more integrated into the market economy than those along the Nam Ngum. Consumption is lower in the Nam Ngum villages and savings greater; though such savings are for

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1. Taillard (1971) p. 134 (my translation).

the most part in kind (reserve rice stocks etc.) and are therefore more difficult to mobilise at will than those of the Mekong villagers which are predominantly in cash. Participation in the market economy increases as one moves from agriculture through non-agricultural production to salaried employment; while in a mainly subsistence economy revenue increases proportionately with the number of active persons in the household. The more a village is integrated into the market economy, the more likely there is to be noticeable differentiation in wealth between the various households. Priorities for community activity along the Nam Ngum tended to be towards the upkeep and improvement of the economic infrastructure (road-building etc.) while along the Mekong, where such facilities already existed, community activity was principally in favour of the Buddhist temple (vat). As a general conclusion Taillard notes that the Mekong village was integrated into the national economy and to a considerable extent dependent on it. One of the Nam Ngum villages was to some extent integrated, while the other was almost totally self-sufficient.

It is in the fourth section that Taillard presents his unfortunate analysis of profitability, underemployment and market values, when he could have attacked the vital problem of how changing economic conditions will affect traditional social values and vice versa. He could have shown that peasant attitudes are not in some way wonderful and unchanging. They are simply born of living in a subsistence economy, where marketing facilities are poor or non-existent, and market values so volatile that the cash profitability of a given activity is quite unpredictable. They are also contained within a society where personal wealth provides little reward except the prestig to be obtained from redistributing it generously to others. Taillard could also have pointed out that with the gradual extension of the

market economy new and desirable goods and services will become available to the peasant, which will promote changes in his motivations and value systems, and that indeed this is already happening. He should also have made clear that the market economy which he describes gradually extending its influence over the Vientiane plain, is exceptionally fragile since the integration of the Mekong village into a national economy is totally dependent on outside aid, and on the massive inputs of 'windfall' foreign exchange being pumped into the economy by the US government in particular. The village is therefore being integrated into an economy which may fall apart at any time, if such aid were to be stopped.

The Lao peasant might not be able to analyse the situation in quite this way, but his reluctance to invest in new economic ventures is at least partly a consequence of his bitter experience of the volatility of markets, and therefore of his desire to insure above all his own subsistence. It is fortunate for those villages which can

> "at the sign of the slightest political or military incident coming to trouble their relationships, ... reconstitute without delay the traditional self-sufficient unit from which they have only recently emerged".[1]

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1. Ibid., pp. 145-6 (my translation).

Studies of myth, ritual and ideology

Charles Archaimbault's work on Lao myth and ritual is based on the most detailed ethnographic observation. Any student of Lao society is bound to be deeply in his debt for the description of ritual, the translation of texts and his analysis of the relationships enacted in ritual. While his study of village and family ritual, particularly funeral rites, will influence my study of village social relations, it is his work on the major 'national' rituals and their accompanying myths, which I shall discuss here as an introductior to my study of political ideology in Chapter Six.

Archaimbault keeps his "generalisation tightly constricted",[1] and the emphasis is always on minute and accurate description, but he occasionally allows himself freedom to analyse, as in his Religious Structures in Laos,[2] and it becomes clear that the whole cycle of national ritual is concerned above all with legitimacy, establishing the right of the king or prince to reign over his people, sometimes by an annual renewal of the mandate, sometimes by a ritual acting out, symbolic of the events which gave the king his power in the first place In the terms of the analysis which I develop in Chapter Six, these rituals illustrate the political ideology of the kingdom, the relationships prescribed between the king and the people. Although Archaimbau devotes himself principally to the structural analysis of these rituals his historical research, and his comparison of the variations in ritual in different parts of the country, allow him to suggest ways in which rituals have been altered and modified as a result of historical events He also believes that rituals may affect, and be affected by, what he

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1. L.M. Hanks, "Foreword" in Archaimbault (1971) p. vii.
2. Archaimbault (1964).

calls "the collective consciousness". He concludes:

> "If history, in acting on ritual, models the unconscious of a culture, this culture fashions the unconscious of individuals, which, as a result of certain historical factors, reacts on the culture by deepening, reinterpreting or modifying ritual".[1]

Archaimbault is not concerned, however, to develop further this complex conclusion on the relationship between history, ritual, culture and the individual unconscious, nor to show specifically how the ritual complexes which he describes may form a background to the study of modern social and political life. Nevertheless, he provides many aids to such an exercise by his account, for example, of how the ritual game of hockey, tī khī, has developed different meanings in different parts of the country.

In his article La fête du T'at à S'ieng Khwang[2] he suggested that whereas the game of tī khī originally signified the submission of the first inhabitants of the Xieng Khouang principality (the Mon-Khmer speaking peoples) to the rule of Lao princes, quite recent historical events had caused the ruling family to commemorate instead the treachery of some district chiefs against the prince, Chao Noi, in the 1820s. Although Chao Noi eventually regained his throne, the battle for supremacy had fatally weakened the principality. The game which Archaimbault witnessed in 1953, therefore, was a match between Muong Khun, representing the established order, the royal house, and made up of civil servants, and Muong Kham, representing the outsiders, the potential rebels. A win for Muong Kham was regarded as a prediction of a year of catastrophes, since it symbolised the victory of the forces of rebellion.

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1. Archaimbault (1971) p. 128 (my translation).
2. Archaimbault (1973c).

In Vientiane, however, tī khī represented an acknowledgement by the king of the rights of the original owners of the land.[1] The team made up of the people of That Luang village represented the aborigines even though they were in fact drawn from the Lao villagers responsible for looking after the great temple. They also represented the countryside, and they had to defeat their opponents, the officials, representing the city, the law and therefore, in a sense, the invaders of the territory. In fact the 'people' win the game by scoring two 'goals', and then they 'help' the officials to score the final 'goal', thereby acknowledging a return to the established political order. Their 'victory' in the match was a reminder of who owned the land before the king's ancestors implanted political order.[2]

In Luang Prabang, the festival of That Luang in the twelfth month, in which the tī khī game used to be played, has lost much of its importance, since the national festival at that time is now performed in Vientiane. In his reconstruction of this elaborate ritual complex, Archaimbault suggests[3] that the game of tī khī would have served to illustrate the establishment of order out of chaos, which Khoun Bourom, the mythical transmitter of order (in the shape of social and politica categories) is supposed to have imposed on the people at the request of the gods. Indeed the whole ritual, lasting several days, of which the game of tī khī was only one part, depicted in a number of scenes the birth of the world, the establishment of the Lao on territory conquered from the aborigines and the foundation of the royal line. The king, whose ancestors have become divinities protecting the kingdom, and who

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1. Archaimbault (1973g).
2. Ibid., p. 12.
3. Archaimbault, ibid., p. 11.

is the administrator of a new law, the Buddhist dharma, presides over the regeneration of the universe, the re-establishment of the natural order, which is achieved by the performance of ritual.[1]

The king sits near the great stupa, whose form mirrors the shape of the cosmos and, theoretically, that of his earthly kingdom,

> 'Meditating near this 'architectural dharma', the king of Laos - imitated in the past by the representatives of the various principalities - identifies himself each year, through the first carriers of the dharma, with Asoka. He masters the waters, and allows the cosmic order to penetrate him, which he then dispenses over the kingdom. However, this abstract foundation of the kingdom is coupled with a concrete foundation (establishment of the principality and of its administrative officers) which cannot be enacted until after the land has been recreated. It is from here that a corpus of ritual derives which is linked with the myths of origin, the legends of foundation, and which goes beyond the Buddhist context and varies according to the different Lao sub-cultures".[2]

Where Archaimbault deals almost entirely with the level of ritual and myth, Pierre Doré uses an analysis of ritual to elucidate everyday political and social relations.[3] Specifically he shows how traditiona authority is based on the consecration of relations of superiority and inferiority through ritual. In addition, he sets out to show that the concept which regulates the exercise of authority, and on which the assessment of authority can be made, is 'piep' (piap), which he translates tentatively as "patrimoine vital" (? 'personal assets' or 'prestige'). He compares piap to the Chinese concept of ming, as described in Granet's La Pensée chinoise[4] which has the characteristics

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1. These ritual performances are typical of South-East Asian kingship based on Brahman models (see Heine-Geldern (1956)), and parallel many features of Thai kingship ceremonial, as described by Quaritch Wales (1931, 1977).
2. Archaimbault (1973c) p. 71 (my translation).
3. Doré (1972a).
4. Granet (1968) p. 376.

of personal name, honour, belongings, attributions. In gaining or losing piap, one raises or lowers one's social status in the general sense; or one may gain piap simply at the expense of one other individual, which merely alters the nature of the relationship with that person rather than one's standing in society as a whole. It is from this that the notion of piap as a regulator of authority derives. Political superiors have more piap than their inferiors. Several observers have noted that the primary stratification of the Lao village is by relative age, and that the main focus of kinship terminology is to make this distinction. However, only Doré has pushed the idea forward to show how all social relations except that of sŧu are governed by the superior/inferior distinction and that the concept which articulates this distinction is that of piap.

How does this notion actually influence daily activities? I examine inter-personal relations in the village and in the town in detail in later chapters, but the following passages give an idea of Doré's own conclusions:

> "the expression of traditional authority is achieved when the following juncture is realised: to insure each person his appropriate piap according to his merits (bun) and thus to realise cosmic harmony (khũ')",[1]

or, as he puts it earlier:

> "The Lao live traditional relationships, founded on the notion of piap, but rationalised in Buddhist terms".[2]

The action of piap in the context of everyday social and political activities, linked to the justifications of inequality contained in the 'national' rituals of legitimacy described by Archaimbault, provide a

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1. Doré (1972a) p. 118 (my translation).

2. Ibid., p. 59.

solid background on which I have tried to build my discussion of modern political relations in village and town (see Chapter Six).

Very recently, Christian Taillard has published two articles[1] which develop Doré's ideas about traditional authority in an attempt to explain the relationships between different types of power in modern rural Laos. In particular his "The Lao village of the Vientiane region - a local power confronted by state power"[2] is an interesting discussion of the relation between the village and the state as political units. His analysis varies somewhat from my own, particularly in its lack of a conceptual distinction between the levels of ritual and of everyday events. Unfortunately, the article did not reach me in time to allow more than passing reference in my section on rural political organisation in Chapter Six.

Writings on Lao religion

The modern development of Theravada Buddhism in Burma, Thailand, Laos and Cambodia is one of the best documented areas in South-East Asian studies, together with political history. Numerous excellent studies exist, of which one may mention, for Burma: Spiro's Burmese Supernaturalism and Buddhism and Society,[3] and Nash's The Golden Road to Modernity,[4] for Thailand: Jane Bunnag's Buddhist Monk, Buddhist Layman,[5] and Tambiah's Buddhism and the Spirit Cults in North-East Thailand,[6] and for Cambodia: Eveline Porée Maspero's massive Etude

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1. Taillard (1977a, 1977b).
2. Taillard (1977a) "Le village lao de la région de Vientiane - un pouvoir local face au pouvoir étatique".
3. Spiro (1967) and (1971).
4. Nash (1965).
5. Bunnag (1973).
6. Tambiah (1970).

sur les rites agraires des Cambodgiens.[1]

Tambiah's book on Buddhism in North-East Thailand is in fact more a study of Lao Buddhism than of Thai, and when put together with Condominas' Notes sur le bouddhisme populaire en milieu rural lao[2] and Zago's Rites et cérémonies en milieu bouddhiste lao,[3] makes an excellent, wide-ranging introduction to Lao Buddhist life and thought.

Writers are agreed that the Theravada Buddhism of South-East Asia has come to be grafted onto, fused with, or moulded by a corpus of pre-existing popular beliefs; and that also participating in the symbiosis are beliefs and practices associated with Brahman kingship and Hindu mythology. Each writer places different emphasis on the importance of the various components and has his own theory of how they all came together and of how the average Lao views the cosmos from the vantage-point of his particular version of "popular Buddhism". With the wealth of material available in the above studies, I have not felt it necessary to provide a general introduction to Lao popular Buddhism in this thesis. Indeed I have discussed features of Lao rural and urban life of which Buddhism is an integral part with only the briefest explanation of the significance of the Buddhist temple (vat), the monkhood (sangha), or the various religious festivals such as the bun phavēt or bun bangfai. At this point it would nevertheless seem appropriate to give a rapid overview of the topics treated in detail by the three key works on Lao Buddhism which I have mentioned.

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1. Porée-Maspero (1962).
2. Condominas (1968).
3. Zago (1972).

Condominas' Notes sur le bouddhisme populaire en milieu rural lao[1] is an excellent introduction to Lao popular religion. He describes the role of the vat in the community, the social functions of the vat and of its various religious and lay officials. He looks at the major Buddhist festivals and at the ceremonies and practitioners concerned with the spirit-cults and with medical care. His description of the structure of the religious community and its activities is comprehensive, though one may quibble again perhaps with his analysis of the bø̄ pen nyang philosophy, which he believes more or less identical to an attitude of indifference and nonchalance, and which he finds particularly prevalent among Buddhist monks.

Tambiah's Buddhism and the Spirit Cults in North-East Thailand[1] attempts an overall analysis of Lao popular Buddhism which is complex and profound. After a full study of the numerous Buddhist and non-Buddhist religious rituals and the myths and beliefs associated with them, Tambiah presents a kaleidoscopic view of the whole religious field which divides into four sectors: Buddhist rites, the Sukhwan Ritual (Brahman), the Cult of Guardian Spirits and the Rites of Malevolent Spirits. These sectors of course overlap and interlock at some levels (concepts, ritual specialists, villager participation, etc.) and the model helps to clarify an acute analysis of the Lao religious world. He considers the relation of popular Buddhism to the great Buddhist literary tradition, and discusses the continuities and transformations which place modern Thai-Lao village Buddhism in the context of Buddhist thought and practice as a whole. He also suggests ways in which the study of a modern religious complex in all the aspects of its belief and practice, myth and ritual, may illuminate the historical study of that religion in the widest sense.

Perhaps the most comprehensive ethnography of modern Lao religion

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1. Tambiah (1970)

has been provided, curiously, by a Catholic priest, Marcel Zago. His Rites et Cérémonies en milieu bouddhiste lao[1] is most remarkable for its 335 pages of description of the vast numbers of rites of all kinds which permeate the lives of Lao Buddhists, monks and laymen. His last 50 pages of interpretation and analysis, however, betray the conceptual framework of the writer's own religion and rely on a rather simple functionalism as a tool of explanation; but the work as a whole is a remarkable compilation of important facts and documents.

Buddhist belief and practice have had the most profound effect on Lao social and political relationships in village and town. Chapters Six and Seven of this thesis explore many features of this influence and the discussion will owe much to the three excellent studies described above.

Urban Studies

The only general research that I know of to have been directed specifically at the development of Lao towns is a thesis by Labarthe entitled Some aspects of the development of the towns of Laos.[2] It is a useful compilation of the few statistics available, recognises the problems of working with inadequate data, but succeeds in giving a good overall account of the rapid development of the five main urban centres in the first 15 years since independence.

Points which he emphasises, and which will play a major role in my discussion of urban development in later chapters, include: the extremely rapid increase in urban population since the Second World War; the gradual 'Laocisation' of the population, as the percentage of foreign residents declined and the Lao took over the national adminis-

1. Zago (1972).

2. Labarthe (1969) Quelques aspects du développement des villes du Laos.

tration; the development of a monetary consumer-oriented economy without any foundation in industry or in agricultural production; the growth of wide differentiation in wealth, reflected in the appearance of new economic classes; and the appreciation of new types of entertainment imported from abroad. He concluded, and this was in 1969:

> "The extremely rapid growth of Vientiane cannot cause us to forget its artificial nature, and we may well wonder what would happen if the town was brutally deprived of foreign money".[1]

Labarthe's realistic view of the long-term choice facing Vientiane was that it lay either in developing the rural economy to stimulate urban markets, or in investment in the industrialisation of the towns to create opportunities for markets in the rural areas. The towns could not survive indefinitely as they were.

Very little research has been done into specific features of Lao urban society. One of the rare exceptions is Elizabeth Loupy's study[2] of the Vientiane markets, in which she shows how Vientiane had come to depend throughout the 1960s on the daily importation of farm produce from across the river in Thailand, to cover something like 60% of the town's regular food requirements.

It did not, therefore, require any long and expensive studies for it to be clear, at the beginning of the 1970s, that Lao urban life was founded on an economic base of the utmost fragility. Chapter Five of this thesis tries to show how that fragility impinged on the daily lives of Lao urban residents.

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1. Ibid., p. 132 (my translation).
2. Loupy (1972).

CHAPTER FOUR INTRODUCTION TO THE VIENTIANE PLAIN AND THE RESEARCH VILLAGES

Geography

In strict geographical terms the plain of Vientiane lies on both sides of the Mekong river, rather more than half of it south of the river in Thailand. Throughout this thesis, however, the terms 'Plain of Vientiane' or 'Vientiane Plain' will be used to refer only to that part of the plain which lies north of the Mekong in Laos.

The plain is the first flat cultivable area of land of any size traversed by the Mekong on its long journey from Tibet to the South China Sea. It has a surface area of approximately 600,000 hectares (or about 2,300 square miles), and is bordered to the south by the Mekong, to the North-East by the escarpment of Phou Khao Khouay and to the west by a range of rather ill-defined hills which separate it from the district of Sanakham and the north-south reach of the Mekong some 60 miles to the west. It is by no means all flat, and is indeed frequently interrupted by ranges of hills which in places can attain 600 feet.

As can be seen from the map on page xv , the principal geographic feature of the plain is the Nam Ngum river which flows in from the mountains of Xieng Khouang province, winds its way tortuously south and then east, and joins the Mekong at the easterly extremity of the plain at Pak Ngum. Since 1971 the flow of the Nam Ngum has been partially controlled by the hydroelectric dam which carries the river's name. This dam should reduce the frequency of the most severe flooding, and also provides opportunities for irrigation projects, which have been begun in some areas, particularly around Tha Ngone.

Its effect on the fertility of the seasonal river-bank gardens, or indeed on the soils of the area as a whole, has not yet been determined. As in most areas irrigation projects are in their infancy, and the crucial climatic feature remains the monsoon rainfall.

The plain has a range of soils of widely varying fertility. The most notable are derived from the alluvial deposits left behind after flooding. The more recent alluvia found along the banks of the two rivers are usually more suitable for vegetable gardens and fruit orchards than for paddy rice, since they tend to be too porous. The older alluvia further inland are appropriate for wet-rice cultivation, but nowhere is the fertility of the soils comparable with the best South-East Asian rice-producing areas, and the best yields are consequently only moderate in international terms. The poorer soils on the slopes of the hills surrounding and interspersing the flat plain are subject to erosion from excessive slash-and-burn cultivation and may be used for occasional crops of hill-rice or maize. Population concentrates in the flatter areas with the richer, more cultivable soils.

Centres of population in the plain both reflect and promote the construction of road communications. The main national artery, Route 13, which links Luang Prabang with Saigon (and will soon - 1978 or 1979 - join up with the Chinese road system in Yunnan province), runs through the plain from north to south until it reaches Vientiane, and then turns slightly north of east to follow the Mekong to its meeting with the Nam Ngum. The French constructed the road to bypass the main villages of the plain rather than to link them, but new villages have sprung up all along its length, particularly on the stretch north of Vientiane, frequently representing off-shoots of long-standing villages which may be located anything up to 10 kilometres from the road along bumpy tracks.

The small town of Phone Hong, for example, now a district centre, grew up entirely around the road junction which takes traffic off Route 13 to the Nam Ngum dam, Ban Keun and that part of the plain north and east of the Nam Ngum. Previously there had been no village on the site. Other main roads serving the plain are those linking Vientiane with Thadeua, the country's principal commercial link with the outside world just across from the rail-head at Nong Khai, and Vientiane to Tha Ngone and thence across the ferry to Ban Keun.

Further material on the geography of the plain can be found in the study by Condominas and Gaudillot, La Plaine de Vientiane[1], and the work of Taillard, Les Berges de la Nam Ngum et du Mekong.[2]

Migrations

Recent archeological excavations at Ban Chieng in North-East Thailand just across the Mekong from Vientiane have shown that this region has been inhabited by sedentary cultivators for several thousand years. The discoveries there are revolutionising accepted views of the history of agriculture, both in the region and in the world.[3]

We can postulate, however, that when the first groups of Tai peoples moved down the valley of the Mekong in the early centuries A.D., mingling with the indigenous Mon-Khmer speaking groups that they would have found in scattered 'semi-nomadic' settlements along the way, they settled fairly early on a site known as Saifong, in the 'loop' of the Mekong some 15 kilometres south of Vientiane, which later became the

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1. Condominas and Gaudillot (1959).
2. Taillard (1971).
3. cf. Peterson (1977) and Gorman (1973).

most northerly outpost of the Khmer empire of Angkor.[1] By the time Fa Ngum defeated the prince of the region (c. 1355) and claimed suzerainty over all the Lao, the capital had already moved upstream to its present site, although when and why the move was made is not known.

The crucial decision, though, for the history of Vientiane and its plain, was that of King Setthathirath, who moved his capital from Luang Prabang to Vientiane in 1563, in order to be further from the marauding Burmese[2] and also possibly to be more centrally placed in relation to the rest of his kingdom.

Setthathirath started the construction of the great That Luang pagoda in Vientiane in 1566, and from then until the death of King Souligna Vongsa in 1694 Vientiane enjoyed the period of its greatest wealth and fame. During the seventeenth century it was certainly the most prosperous town in Indo-China. Monks are reported to have come from far and wide to study in its renowned pagodas. We can assume that the villages in the surrounding plain grew and prospered accordingly. The glory, however, did not survive the death of Souligna Vongsa, and Chao Anou's attack on Bangkok of 1828 was more the last despairing lunge of a prince whose territory had been riven by inconclusive disputes between rival claimants to sovereignty, than the serious challenge of a powerful monarch.

We can suppose that the brutal de-population of Vientiane and the surrounding plain by the Siamese in 1829-30 merely accelerated a gradual

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1. Finot (1903) and Maspero (1903).
2. Le Boulanger (1931) p. 81.

exodus coinciding with the area's general decline in fortunes. The sack of the city and the forced migrations across the river into what is now Thailand meant, however, that the bottom had been reached. During the years leading up to the arrival of the French in the 1890s, the plain was gradually re-populated by migrations from outside. These were from two directions. The inhabitants of the lowlands of Xieng Khouang province, a Lao-speaking group called the Lao Phouan, were regularly plundered by Ho pirates from Yunnan throughout the nineteenth century, and whole villages fled south down the course of the Nam Ngum river. They found many parts of the Vientiane plain conveniently deserted. At the same time the Siamese encouraged families from the area south of the Mekong who were loyal to them to cross over and settle on the vacant lands. In 1900, when the French were considering establishing their Résident Supérieur in Vientiane, the city had a population of about 1,000. It is therefore probably not too much to say that over 90% of the present-day population of the city and plain are immigrants or descended from immigrants who have arrived in the last 150 years.

Of Vientiane G. Maspero was able to write in 1903:

> "Vieng-cham is now no more than a large village: a hundred Lao huts, a few Chinese shops, a dozen ruined pagodas, invaded by weeds and inhabited by a few idle monks".[1]

L. de Lajonquière, noting that "The mission of De Lagrée (1867) found only ruins where Van Wusthoff (1641) had found palaces and celebrating crowds",[2] had already written in 1901, however, "the dead town is awakening", after it had been chosen as the seat of the French

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1. Maspero (1903) p. 1 (my translation).
2. Lajonquière (1901) p. 99 (my translation).

Rēsident Supérieur.

If the nineteenth century was marked by the movement of neighbouring populations into an abandoned city and its surrounding plain, the twentieth century has seen immigrations from further afield. The initial French interest in Laos in the 1860s and 1870s was in the hope of finding a practical route into Southern China. When this hope was disappointed, twenty years of inactivity intervened before the readiness of the King of Luang Prabang to be protected by Auguste Pavie from the Siamese coincided well with the French desire to halt the advance of British colonialism east of Burma, and thus to protect their interests in Vietnam and Cambodia.

As the French moved into Vientiane at the turn of the century, the city grew steadily. Vietnamese were brought in to run the lower levels of the administration and provide technical services. Chinese merchants followed, though apparently not in very great numbers initially. By 1930 the population of Vientiane city was 15,800. By 1943 it was 23,200, of whom over half, 12,400, were Vietnamese.[1] There were 900 Chinese, 330 other foreigners and some 9,570 Lao, of whom Pietrantoni notes that 4,000 should really be classed as rural.[2] So by the end of the Second World War there were perhaps 6,000 Lao living as genuine townspeople in their national capital, and of these it is fair to assume that a good proportion were immigrants from Thailand.

The population explosion began after the Second World War, and here again we come up against the lack of accurate statistical information. The description which follows, therefore, and the table summarising it,

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1. It seems likely that a number of the 'Vietnamese' were of Chinese origin.

2. Pietrantoni (1957) p. 230.

represent nothing more than approximations based on the available information.

As far as the city of Vientiane is concerned, the proportion of Vietnamese in the population, who had been in the majority in 1943, rapidly declined as the country moved towards independence. Most of those who had served in the administration returned to Vietnam, although some, particularly those from the north, remained and took up teaching or entered commerce. While the composition of the Vietnamese population changed, and numbers naturally fluctuated, it seems possible that the overall total number of Vietnamese living in Vientiane in 1973 was not much below the 12,400 total in 1943, (the figure of 9,170 is given in the census of 1966), refugees from the war in Saigon replacing those who returned to Vietnam in the late 1940s. Unfortunately the only statistics published since independence on the ethnic division of population in Vientiane are those of the 1966 census,[1] which divides the population into Lao, Vietnamese, Chinese and 'others'.

The arrival of Americans in the mid-1950s and the continuing increase in American activity in Vientiane until the end of the 1960s can clearly account for much of the rapid increase of urban population during this period. The Americans themselves were never very numerous, (perhaps 2-3,000 at most including families), and the Filipinos and Taiwanese brought in to assist them were hardly significant factors in population growth. The population boom came from the inflow of Lao from the Plain, the provinces and from North-East Thailand. I discuss in later chapters the relative effect of 'push' and 'pull' factors in this migration. Clearly both were operating. It is

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1. Inthavong (1970).

unfortunately quite impossible to give even an approximate idea of the places of origin of the 100,000 people who moved to Vientiane in the 15 years from 1958 to 1973. If I were to hazard that of the 100,000 increase in population between 1958 and 1973, 20,000 were accountable to natural increase, 5,000 were Chinese or Vietnamese, 10,000 were Americans, Filipinos, Taiwanese, Indians, Europeans and other Asians, 15,000 were Lao from provinces in Laos other than Vientiane, 20,000 were from the Vientiane plain and 30,000 were from Thailand, it would certainly be wrong, but it gives an idea. In any case the argument is academic since a Lao is a Lao whether he is born in Thailand, Pakse or Vientiane. What has to be noted, therefore, is that the first city of any size in Laos since the late seventeenth century grew rapidly during the period with immigrants arriving from throughout the Lao world for a great variety of reasons.

The evolution during the post-war period of migratory patterns in the Vientiane Plain is easier to establish. By 1968, when the movement of refugees from the war in Xieng Khouang began, there was already a shortage of good cultivable land in the Plain and the 40,000 refugees, mostly Lao Phouan but with many Meo and a few Lao Theung, were settled mainly in arid infertile areas where they had to be regularly supplied with supplementary food rations.

The pattern of non-refugee immigration into the Plain had by then changed from the sort of wholesale movement of families and even villages, which still seems to have been possible in the early years of the twentieth century, to a trickle of poor migrants, mostly from North-East Thailand, usually single men or young couples, who came seeking seasonal agricultural labour, and who sometimes were able to find a wife or were adopted by farmers whose own children had moved into the

town to continue their education and take up employment. These migrants filled a gap in the village labour market created by the spread of primary education, which took children out of the fields, and by the movement of young people into Vientiane seeking urban employment.

Another important group of migrants into the Plain in the early 1960s were Tai Dam (Black Tais) from North Vietnam who, having sided with the French in the first Indo-China war, had fled south into Xieng Khouang province at the time of Dien Bien Phu. In the early 1960s they were granted some land north of Vientiane, and a few remain there, but for most it was a stepping-stone to a move to Vientiane where they were quickly engaged by the newly arriving Americans as domestic servants and in menial jobs for the Embassy and Aid mission. They have not integrated into Lao society and as there was a small community in my urban research village, I discuss their position in Vientiane's urban society in later chapters.[1]

A few Chinese moved out from Vientiane into the district towns of Phone Hong and Ban Keun particularly, where they acted mainly as agents for larger businesses in Vientiane. Almost no Vietnamese, Indians or Europeans lived outside the capital. In the villages of the Plain one would find a few people who had migrated from other provinces in Laos, but their numbers were not significant. Except in the northern part around Phone Hong, where relations are kept up with the Vang Vieng area and in the east, where communication across the Nam Ngum into Borikhane province is easy, the majority of villages in the Plain would consider the people of Nong Khai province in North-East Thailand as their

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1. Labarthe (1969) p. 115 gives a figure of 4,955 Tai Dam in Vientiane city in 1966.

most immediate neighbours outside the plain itself, as of course they are in the geographical and cultural senses, divided though they might be by a recent political boundary.

Demography

Just as there are no accurate statistics on migration, so those which reveal the characteristics of the present population in terms of age and sex are incomplete and unreliable. A census was carried out in 1973 of both Vientiane city and the Vientiane plain, but as yet no results have been published, except that the total population of the city was found to be 176,184. A census of the city was carried out in 1966 which gave a total population of 132,253. Although there are grounds for doubting its accuracy, it is worth noting some of its findings.[1]

There were 68,866 men and 63,387 women (52.07% - 47.93%), an imbalance reflecting the temporary migration of young men looking for work, for which we would expect to find a corresponding bias in favour of women in the surrounding Plain population.

56.6% of the population were under 20, 74.94% under 30 and 87.62% under 40. The extreme youth of the city population, of course, reflects the fact that most migrants are young, and that the main wave of immigration is recent. Higher standards of health care and a diminishing infant mortality rate may also play a part. It would be reasonable to expect a correspondingly older population in the rural areas.

The average number in a household in Vientiane in 1966 was 5.81.

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1. The following figures are taken from Inthavong (1970).

By 1972, a sample survey estimated that figure at 7.08. This survey suggested that while the number of households had increased between 1966 and 1972 by 5.41%, the actual population had risen by 28.54%.[1] This is by no means impossible, and would reflect both a high birth rate among the young urban families and a change in the nature of immigration patterns, with young people from the Plain and the provinces moving to Vientiane to join relatives who were already established, rather than coming to set up on their own.

The 1966 census does include a breakdown of the population by nationality, and out of a total of 132,253, 99,951 are said to be Lao, 9,170 Vietnamese, 5,916 Chinese and 17,216 'others'. The figures, although disappointingly vague about who the 'others' might be, and although some 'Lao' may have claimed Lao nationality to be on the safe side, do reflect the dramatic decline in the position of the Vietnamese who have gone from 53.45% of the population in 1943 to 6.93% in 1966.

There are unfortunately no comparable figures for the Plain. The 1973 census[2] found 110,000 people in the four districts immediately surrounding the city of Vientiane, but did not touch the three outlying districts, including that in which Ban Phon Sung is located. We can perhaps assume that the population of the plain is slightly larger overall than that of the city, but we should expect to find smaller households, a generally older population, and probably an imbalance in favour of women, particularly in the 15-24 age group, where so many men have moved into town.

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1. Royaume du Laos (1971).

2. Royaume du Laos (1973b).

The village of Ban Phon Sung

The village of Ban Phon Sung is a compact group of 90 households, situated in the middle of a large, flat plain entirely turned over to rice-fields. Fifty kilometres north of Vientiane on the road to Luang Prabang you turn right down a track (sandy or muddy according to season) and after a mile or so travelling through small fields and lightly wooded grazing land you come to the top of a rise as the road crosses a stream and there laid out in front is the plain, green with the growing rice in October, yellowing as it ripens until the harvest in December/January when the browns of stubble and dust take over. In May the grass of the early rains covers it until ploughing in June. In the middle of this panorama, some half a mile away, is the village, its houses hidden beneath the cover of the well-developed palms which denote a long-established village.

History of Ban Phon Sung

Ban Phon Sung means 'village of the tall hill', which the inhabitants admit is amusing, since the ground surrounding it is almost entirely flat. They say that the name certainly refers to another site from which the original inhabitants moved long ago, but where that site was and how long ago they moved they were unable to say.

This ignorance of the history of the village is surprising, since it would be reasonable to suppose that the ancestors of the present Lao Phouan population migrated from Xieng Khouang province after the Siamese depopulation of Vientiane in 1830, in which case one would expect the event to be remembered. It is possible, though, that the village was established during an earlier movement, perhaps in the eighteenth century, and that it was too far from Vientiane to be affected by the

Siamese depredations. Whatever the truth, there is no collective memory in the village of a migration, and so far as I could discover no story recounting the foundation of the village either on its original or its present site. Indeed in general there seemed to be little interest in delving into the past. When my persistent enquiries got older people to describe what life was like when they were young, the surprise of their children at some of the accounts made it seem as though they were probably hearing such things for the first time.

What is clear, though, is that Ban Phon Sung was already a large and probably prosperous village by 1938, when a French map shows it as the only village worthy of mention on the road north from Vientiane before Hin Heup which is at Km 100. In 1973 it certainly would no longer have been so distinguished, but it was still a comparatively large and prosperous village by comparison with its neighbours, although possibly losing ground economically to some other villages in the Plain through being neither on the main road nor on the Nam Ngum river, and therefore less able to take advantage of new commercial opportunities. Its history since independence, however, was by no means unexciting, and the village elders had played a delicate balancing act between the political forces competing for control of the region. Several other villages in the region, whose leaders were less astute, had been burnt to the ground by one side for showing excessive favour to the other.

In 1958 a group of Ban Phon Sung families had left to join the Pathet Lao in the jungle, but the village leaders later persuaded them to return. In 1961 when Kong Le retreated from Vientiane to Xieng Khouang in the face of Phoumi Nosavan's CIA-supported army (see Chapter Two), half a dozen village boys aged 15 had gone with him, and by 1973

nothing had been heard from any of them. As Phoumi Nosavan's forces took control of the Plain, a number of neighbouring villages had decamped in their entirety to follow Kong Le. Their villages were burnt to the ground as a result.

Since that time the village had entertained both the Vientiane government of the day and the Pathet Lao. A system of checks was worked out whereby if the sympathisers of either side harmed supporters of the other, that other side was committed to burn down the whole village. By 1974, although tensions certainly remained within the village, the inhabitants appeared to be looking forward with equanimity to the changes in national political life which had already been foreshadowed by the cease-fire and the formation of the Provisional Government of National Union.

The site

The track across the paddy fields which leads from the main road into the village divides Ban Phon Sung neatly in two, and, with houses facing it on either side, runs straight into the vat (Buddhist temple) (see sketch map). The houses to the left of the track are said to be in Ban Nū'a (the north village) and those to the right in Ban Tai (the south village). The only building which cannot be so classified is the vat. The division may once have been of significance, but its only use now is for convenient reference or for joking disparagement, as for example when a girl from Ban Tai teases her boyfriend by complaining that she cannot hope to compete with the charming girls from Ban Nū'a who are sure to snare him away from her.

The village's 90 houses lie close together but are not cramped. Each has its own identifiable compound, although frequently the light

fence does not surround the house entirely, but may just protect it on the side of a path down which cattle are driven, which might otherwise stray into the compound.

Although the range of house design and construction is much less broad than in town, the house is a reasonable first indication of the wealth of its occupants. All houses are of the same basic design, the living accommodation on a single floor raised from the ground between 5 and 7 feet by strong wooden posts, and consisting of three units: a communal area for eating and receiving guests, a closed-off area in which the family sleeps and keeps its belongings, and a kitchen/washing area. Within this basic design, variations, largely depending on the wealth of the family, are numerous. A poor house is made almost entirely from bamboo, apart from the main pillars of wood, and the roof of grass thatch. The house of a wealthy man is made of good hard wood, the roof has corrugated iron sheeting and it has a floor and a ceiling of wooden planks. Underneath the house the ground may be raised and concreted, so that the family can sit there in the hot weather without being bothered with dust or mud. Villagers admit that these recent 'improvements' in building techniques made possible by the availability of saws, nails and corrugated iron are a mixed blessing. Certainly they allow larger more stylish accommodation, and the roofing material does not have to be changed every three or four years like thatch, but corrugated iron is extremely hot under the sun and noisy under the monsoon rains, wood is a much less comfortable surface to sit or lie on than bamboo, and wooden walls do not allow that pleasant breeze to circulate which comes through bamboo slats. My host family would complain that in their new 'modern' house they were obliged to take their siesta under the house because it was so hot inside.

Only one house in the village was enclosed on the ground floor, and this was a small shop, strategically located just before the entrance to the vat, where the family sold a few inexpensive items on the ground floor, but lived, as in any other house, upstairs.

Within the compound of each house there is a rice granary, which is constructed rather like a small house but with the walls' flat surface facing in rather than out. Also within the compound there may be a variety of pens and cages in which one or two pigs, and a few ducks or hens are kept. Some families tie their buffaloes under the house during the working season.

Immediately around the village is a strip of land about 15 yards wide which is normally given over to vegetable gardens, and beyond that lie the paddy fields. Another indication of comparative wealth is the location, as well as the size of course,of the family's fields. The leading families have their fields near the village in the lower ground which most easily absorbs the moisture if there is not enough rain, which indeed is the most common cause of crop failure. The view over the fields is not unbroken, as there is an occasional clump of palms and fruit trees. This is the suan of a family, where they have coconut, papaya and banana trees, and where they normally keep their buffalo and oxen. A simple bamboo cabin on stilts allows them to take refuge from sun or rain, or simply rest during work in the fields.

Walking on, away from the village over the paddy-dikes, we come to the hai land. This is land too uneven to make paddy-fields, which is used most often for swidden rice, but sometimes for maize and root vegetables. After each cropping the fertility is reduced, so that usually after two years use it must be allowed to lie fallow for up to 15 years, depending on the area, and a secondary forest of thick prickly

bushes grows up and regenerates the soil. In this area of hai land are to be found a number of ponds, both natural and artificial, in which fish can be caught. Fishing is a most important activity in Ban Phon Sung, and the way it is organised will be discussed in detail in the next chapter's section on the rural economy.

When the hai has been left uncultivated for a number of years, it returns to the general category of pā or 'forest'. Strictly speaking the forest is a sort of no man's land area which separates a village from its neighbours. Anyone may hunt in it, walk through it, gather wild roots, fruit or flowers, and monks may have little shacks built where they retreat to meditate, but it is an area where the layman does not often walk alone if he can help it, and certainly not after dark, for fear both of wild animals and of evil spirits. In fact, in the case of Ban Phon Sung there is not much real pā left, since the timber lorries carried away all the great trees of any value in the area.[1] Villagers have to travel increasing distances to reach the stands of less good wood which are to be used for firewood.

The lands of Ban Phon Sung are bounded to the west by the main road and the villages on it, to the north by only a narrow stretch of forest which divides them from those of the next village, to the east it is perhaps twenty minutes' walk through light woods from the last Ban Phon Sung fields to the tobacco plantations of a neighbouring village on the Nam Ngum river, and to the south only a raised cart track divides the fields of Ban Phon Sung from those of the next village. The pressure on land is beginning to make itself felt. The stream which flows just past the village used to have water in it most of the year. Now it is

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1. See below 'forestry', p. 145.

almost permanently dry, since the villages further up, including a new refugee village, keep damming it up. This is not the disaster it might once have been though, since a number of good new wells have been sunk in the village in recent years.

Demography

The population of Ban Phon Sung was surveyed by households during the early dry season of 1974. Included in the survey was each individual resident in the household on the day of the survey and any who were normally resident there, but happened to be absent on that particular day. Included in a separate survey were any children of the person considered to be head of the household who had moved elsewhere. So there is information on 'residents' and 'non-residents'. I am aware that the group 'non-residents' is unsatisfactorily defined since a man may be excluded because his parents had just died and his sister's husband has become head of the household. The number of 'non-residents' is in any case too small to be statistically interesting. Information about them was simply sought as a means of throwing light on the movements and achievements of the community.

The population of Ban Phon Sung is divided by age and sex according to the following table:

Table 1 Population of Ban Phon Sung (by age and sex)

	Male	Female	Total	%	Total %
50 -	40	33	73	12.6	100
40 - 49	24	36	60	10.4	87.4
30 - 39	21	23	44	7.6	77.0
20 - 29	32	35	67	11.6	69.4
10 - 19	62	95	157	27.1	57.8
0 - 9	94	84	178	30.7	30.7
	273 (47.15%)	306 (52.85%)	579	100	

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Some notable features of the sex and age distribution are:

(a) The small number of boys (12) compared to girls (46) in the age-group 15-19. This is due to the boys who continue their education in town after primary school, join the army, or find a job, particularly in the dry season, while girls stay at home and wait for suitable marriage partners. Indeed we find many of these missing boys in the 'non-residents' survey where boys of 15-19 outnumber girls 24 to 8.

(b) There is an apparent shortage of girls in the 5-9 group (30 girls to 50 boys), which points out well the dangers of reading too much into statistics of this magnitude obtained in this way. I pointed out in Chapter One the difficulties of assessing age accurately in Lao society, and also the small size of my samples. In this case there is no conceivable reason for a shortfall of girls age 5-9, and in fact we find that in taking 10 year comparisons, the bias in favour of boys is much reduced. (In the 5-9 group 50 male to 30 female = 1.67. In 0-9, 94 male 84 female = 1.12 and in 5-14, 100 male 79 female = 1.27.)

(c) Comparing the figures with those obtained by the urban survey

of 1966, we find that the male predominance in Vientiane (52.07-47.93) is almost exactly reversed in Ban Phon Sung (47.15-52.85). However, the figures show that when Vientiane is called a 'young' city, it is due to the high numbers between 20-40, rather than to exceptionally large numbers of children. In Vientiane 56.5% of the population is under 20 (in Ban Phon Sung 57.8%), but in Vientiane 87.6% is under 40 (in Ban Phon Sung 77%).

Birth-places

The most interesting idea of movement in and out of the village can perhaps be gained by looking at the birth-places of couples. Exactly 100 living couples were identified in the 90 households. Of these, 49 claimed both partners were born in the village, 48 claimed one partner was born outside the village, and 3 said both were born outside the village. Thus of 200 adult individuals 146 were born in the village and 54 came from outside.

Of the 48 couples of which one partner came from outside 35 immigrants were men as against 13 women, which supports the notion of preferred matrilocal residence. It is, however, interesting to look at where these outsiders came from. Of the 13 women, 3 came from the immediate neighbourhood (other villages in the sub-district), 6 came from other villages in the Vientiane Plain, 2 from Thailand and 2 from provinces in Laos outside Vientiane. Of the 35 men, 5 came from the sub-district, 14 from the rest of the Plain, one from Vientiane city, 7 from Thailand and 8 from other provinces in Laos. Of the three immigrant couples, one came from the sub-district, one from the Plain and one was a refugee family from a neighbouring province which had been allowed to establish itself in the village.

These results probably represent a fairly standard pattern in the history of the village. Three-quarters of those born in the village could expect to die there. One quarter, most of them male, would seek spouses elsewhere and be replaced by spouses coming in to marry in the village. Some of those who have moved in recently probably came from further away than would have been likely 20 years earlier, but it is the movement outwards of this generation's young men, not simply to marry, but to study and work for wages, which is the symptom of new demographic patterns beginning to establish themselves.

The Village of Ban Savang

Ban Savang is a suburban village on the northern outskirts of the city of Vientiane and had a population in 1973 of about 1,450. The tarmac road runs straight about 2½ kms from the centre of the city between rows of varied housing, mostly poor, but a few Chinese-style shop-fronts and the occasional villa behind concrete walls raise the tone. At the entrance to the village, which is not marked in any way, the road forks. To the right (see map), the road, which immediately turns into a dusty laterite surface, more or less bisects the village over a distance of almost exactly 1 km. The branch which leads straight ahead retains its tarmac until in its turn it separates, the right fork leading into the village vat and the left across a bridge out into the country.

As can be seen from the map, the village is in no sense a compact unit on the model of Ban Phon Sung. Indeed its boundaries were fixed for administrative convenience and have little natural logic. To the north and west the boundary is the important stream the Nam Passak, whose juncture with the Mekong once marked the western limits of

Vientiane city. To the south the road, and to the east a stretch of open fields, separate the village from its neighbours.

It may be questioned whether there is any justification for calling Ban Savang a village. First the word bān meaning 'village' is used in both urban and rural contexts. Secondly, the same administrative system applies in urban and rural areas. As with Ban Phon Sung, Ban Savang is one of several bān making up a Tasseng (tāsāeng) (sub-district). Several Tasseng make up a Muong (mū'ang) (district), and a group of Muong forms a Khoueng (khuāeng) (province) or in the case of the city the four districts make up the Khampheng Nakhǭn (khamphāeng nakhǭn) (municipality). Thirdly, Ban Savang has one vat fairly centrally located which in theory caters for all the inhabitants, although not all use it. Yet the unit in the urban 'village' which retains the greatest sense of community is the khum, which I translate as 'ward'. The map shows the way the village is divided into 7 wards, each representing something of a spatial unity. The ward leaders, chosen by their fellow householders, coordinate village activities with the village headman, who, with his two assistants (samian) report to the Tasseng,[1] and so on up the hierarchy.

History of Ban Savang

Of the 195 people over 20 years old covered by my one-third sample only 7 were born in Ban Savang. Indeed one of the village's most long-standing residents remembers how he built his house in 1949 in a countryside of nothing but fields and woods. To reach Vientiane one walked

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1. The word 'Tasseng' refers both to the sub-district and the official in charge of it. The village headman is nāi bān (village chief) or phǭ bān (village father), the district governor is a Chao Muong and the provincial governor a Chao Khoueng.

along the dikes of paddy fields for about a mile before reaching the road. The explosion of the city of Vientiane in the late 1950s and early 1960s brought the road, and the road brought tempting offers to the farmers for the purchase of their land on which housing for the new generation of commuters could be erected. But the impetus for the growth of a Lao community (as opposed to a simple agglomeration of houses) comes generally with the founding of a vat. When a rural village is founded, one of the first acts of the founding families is to try to get a monk to inhabit a makeshift construction on the edge of their new settlement. This is known initially as a vat pā (pa = forest). As the community grows, so the vat will grow, its buildings become permanent and the number of monks and novices increase. In Ban Savang this process was cut short by the arrival of a wealthy benefactor from the city, who, having had the good fortune to be sitting on a sizeable part of what became the centre of urban Vientiane in the early 1960s, was able to achieve the Buddhist layman's dearest dream, that of endowing a new vat. New buildings have made Ban Savang's vat one of the best equipped in that part of town, but inevitably there has been less feeling of participation and community in the village than some might have wished. More recently there had been criticism that the founder's widow tried to influence what went on so much that the elders were discouraged in their promotion of community activities. The vat was no longer muan (= fun, interesting).

The criticism of this wealthy family may be an attempt to explain the disappointment that Ban Savang has never really acquired a corporate identity. Clearly, in a number of cases people had tried to encourage friends and relatives to move into the same neighbourhood, and there are a few groups of three or four houses where families have created small close-knit communities, but the problems we had in simply locating many

of the people whose names were on the census list gives an indication of how little even the village leaders knew about the people living in their area.

One exception, however, is represented by ward 7. The map shows how neat and compact is this little group of 18 households. The occupants are Tai Dam (Black Tai) who left northern Vietnam between 1952 and 1954, spent some years in Xieng Khouang province, were given a piece of land 20 miles north of Vientiane in 1962 and moved onto this site, obtained for them by an influential Lao official, in 1966. Here they have recreated, as nearly as they can, the community life they knew in northern Vietnam.

Housing

Vientiane has not followed the example of some Asian cities and divided neatly into exclusive garden suburbs in one part of town while the slums nestle in another corner. Ban Savang is typical in that it contains examples of considerable wealth and also of great poverty. A number of fine modern houses have been built and surrounded by high walls or fences, particularly in wards 1 and 4. At the other end of the scale are the rows of one room huts with one family to a room let out to day labourers at a tiny rent. Between these two extremes comes a whole range of styles and sizes of accommodation. In wards 5 and 6 in particular many houses are not at all different from those I have described for Ban Phon Sung. Again the quality of the wood, the amounts of wood and bamboo used, are indicators of the wealth of the family. Also represented in the village is what may be termed 'South-East Asian urban Chinese shop-house style', a two storey concrete construction, where the ground floor is open during the day for business or receiving guests, and the family lives upstairs. The shop is closed

with those collapsible metal 'grille' gates that open and shut with a rattling noise which is one of the permanent background sounds of South-East Asian cities. The village headman of Ban Savang lives in one of these houses, and finds it convenient to be able to conduct his business on the ground floor, without having to disturb his family at every turn.

The most popular way of building a new house for those who feel they are on their way up in economic terms, is first to construct a wooden Lao style house on pillars, say 8 feet above the ground. Then, as funds become available, the ground under the house is flattened and concreted, and eventually the ground floor can be closed in with brick walls to form a two-storey house. Then guests can be received downstairs, while the upstairs can be turned over entirely to sleeping quarters, probably just as well with a rapidly expanding young family. There are several such houses in Ban Savang, mostly owned by civil servants or merchants.

What one finds in the compounds of these houses varies as much as the construction of the houses themselves. As will be shown when discussing the urban economy, Ban Savang's land is owned by a handful of people, and what appears on the map to be a large area of paddy fields in fact supports very few families. The occupants of any given house may be renting the house and land, or own the house, but rent the land it sits on, or own both house and land. Few have any substantial room in which to plant a garden or raise animals, although several families own a patch of land (<u>sŭan</u>) further out in the country where they have planted fruit-trees and grow a few vegetables.

Demography

I have described in Chapter One the difficulties encountered with survey work in the urban village. In addition, a significant proportion of the population of Ban Savang was transient. This group consisted almost exclusively of the poorest families living in the cheap one-room accommodation described above. Those who had made an investment in their housing were naturally more stable, although if a man owned the house, but could not persuade his landlord to sell him the land it stood on, he might knock down the house and build it up again a couple of miles away using the same materials on a piece of land he had managed to purchase. So, while the very rich were often reluctant to be interviewed (and in any case frequently had no contact whatever with their neighbours in the village) the very poor often spent a month or two in a rented room while working on a construction project nearby before moving on. Thus, a name which appeared on the list of household heads established by the census team in February 1973, might be a dim recollection in the minds of one or two immediate neighbours by August of the same year. Naturally these rented rooms were more in demand during the dry season, when agricultural labourers sought seasonal urban employment, so the population of the village, while difficult to determine at any time, was likely to be higher from December to May than from June to November.

The numbers in the village, then, in the period July 1973 to July 1974 probably fluctuated around 1,500 people living in 200 households. My survey group of 68 households containing 507 people is therefore approximately a 1 in 3 sample. The sample households are fairly evenly distributed among the 7 wards, but although initially the households interviewed were chosen by taking Nos. 1, 4, 7, 10 etc. on the Census Bureau list, this method proved impossible to follow entirely, largely

owing to the high mobility mentioned earlier. As a result the sample is not statistically valid, and is probably biased in favour of the middle income groups, at the expense of the richer and poorer groups. The figures below then represent little more than 68 families interviewed. If multiplied by 3 they might give an approximation of the figures to be expected for Ban Savang as a whole. If extrapolated to cover 'the urban population of Vientiane', they would certainly be quite unrepresentative in a number of ways.

The following table shows the age-sex distribution:

Table 2 Population of Ban Savang (by age and sex)

	Male	Female	Total	%	Total %
50 -	18	19	37	7.3	100
40 - 49	13	11	24	4.7	92.7
30 - 39	28	23	51	10.1	88.0
20 - 29	40	43	83	16.4	77.9
10 - 19	72	73	145	28.6	61.5
0 - 9	80	87	167	32.9	32.9
	251 (49.5%)	256 (50.5%)	507	100.	

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The following comments seem appropriate:

(a) The sexes are extremely evenly balanced. Men are more numerous from 15-19 (35m 25f) which one might be tempted to assign to the presence of young men from the country staying with relatives in town while they continue their education. But this is balanced by the preponderance of girls in the 10-14 range (48-37) and 20-24 group (23-17). In fact, of course, several factors are in operation. Boys do indeed come to study in Vientiane, but other young men are away from home fighting in the army. Similarly there are a number of girl migrants employed as

domestic servants, who most often come from poor families in North-East Thailand.

(b) The number of 'non-residents' (children or spouses of the head of the household not resident in the household at the time of the survey) is not surprisingly quite low, since the 'newness' of the village has meant that immigrants of the past 15 years who arrived as young couples have not yet produced children of an age to leave home. In fact Ban Savang has only 43 'non-residents' (equivalent to 8.48% of the total population) while Ban Phon Sung has 112 (19.34%).

(c) If we compare the age distribution in Ban Phon Sung and Ban Savang with the findings of the 1966 Vientiane census, in percentage terms, the following table results:

Table 3 Comparison of age distribution in Ban Phon Sung, Ban Savang and 1966 Vientiane city census

	Ban Phon Sung %	Ban Savang %	Vientiane 1966 %
50 -	12.61	7.30	6.04
40 - 49	10.36	4.73	6.34
30 - 39	7.60	10.06	12.68
20 - 29	11.57	16.37	18.44
10 - 19	27.12	28.60	21.17
0 - 9	30.74	32.94	35.32
	100	100	100

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The figures for Ban Savang show little variation from those of the 1966 urban census, although Ban Savang is somewhat more populous between 10-19 and among the over 50s, but Ban Phon Sung has significantly fewer people between 20 and 40, and significantly more over 40s, confirming the impression of the movement of young adult migrants from countryside to town.

(d) One of the most striking features of Ban Savang as compared with Ban Phon Sung is household size. In Ban Phon Sung there were 579 persons in 90 households, an average of 6.43. In Ban Savang there are 507 persons in 68 households, or an average of 7.46. A good deal of this difference can be explained by the large number of extra relatives living in the urban households. Surprising though it might seem, the household consisting of a simple nuclear family is more common in Ban Phon Sung where 50/90 (55.56%) of households are occupied by nuclear families than in the urban village where only 27/68 (39.71%) take this form. We shall see in later chapters that the idea of a traditional village extended family being replaced during the movement to the cities by the nuclear family is quite inapplicable to the Lao situation.

If we eliminate from the surveys those who do not form part of the basic nuclear family unit in each household, we get an approximate idea of average family size. In Ban Phon Sung the figure works out at 5.48 ($579-86 - \frac{493}{90}$) and in Ban Savang 6.15 ($507-89 - \frac{418}{68}$). To have a rough idea of how many children a woman who reaches middle age may expect to see survive, I looked at all the women over 40 for whom I had a complete list of living children. In Ban Phon Sung 56 women in this category had 280 children, an average of exactly 5. In Ban Savang 24 women (most of the women there were under 40) had 143 children, or an average of nearly 6 each (5.96), and the numbers of live children were clearly rising among urban women in their 20s and 30s. These figures reflect a reduction in infant mortality in urban areas, and to a lesser extent certainly in rural areas as well, but the urban figures are distorted by the numbers of children in families of the better educated, wealthier people. Contrary to what might be expected, family planning has had almost no impact, even among this more privileged group, and in

cases where there are 10 or more surviving children (6 cases in Ban Savang) (no cases in Ban Phon Sung) the father is, in most cases, a senior government official or a well-off merchant. As will be discussed later, there is a considerable awareness of problems associated with family size, but very few have had access to modern family planning techniques. The implications for population growth and family economies of these figures are important and are discussed below (Chapter Five).

Birth places

In looking at 100 married couples in Ban Phon Sung, we saw that 146 individuals were born in the village itself. For the 74 couples identified in Ban Savang only 7 individuals out of 148 were born in the village. Indeed there is in the sample only one couple in which both partners were born in the village. The origins of the 148 individuals, compared with those of the 200 from Ban Phon Sung, are shown in the following table:

Table 4 Places of birth of married couples - Ban Phon Sung and Ban Savan

	Ban Phon Sung	Ban Savang
Ban Phon Sung	146 (73%)	-
Ban Savang	-	7 (4.7%)
Vientiane city	1 (0.5%)	31 (20.9%)
Vientiane province	32 (16%)	24 (16.2%)
Northern Lao provinces	9 (4.5%)	20 (13.5%)
Southern Lao provinces	3 (1.5%)	35 (23.6%)
Thailand	9 (4.5%)	17 (11.5%)
Vietnam		12 (8.1%)
Cambodia		1 (0.7%)
Taiwan		1 (0.7%)
	200	148

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The population of Ban Savang is clearly thoroughly diverse in its origins, and, as we have already seen, in its standard of living. More wide variations will certainly emerge in the study of its economic and political activities and of its social and cultural life.

CHAPTER FIVE SUBSISTENCE AND WEALTH - ECONOMIC RELATIONS IN RURAL AND URBAN LAOS

> "The village seems rich and the inhabitants happy: cultivation of rice provides them with food, and the water in the river is deliciously cool. This is all that Laotian ambition demands: as a result these people breathe happiness. Without jealousy of the relative luxury of the upper class, without wishing to increase their pleasures, these men live calm, happy and free. Poor people who in their ignorance smile at the passage of the European! They have no idea of the cares and miseries which this white man will bring them in the future with what he calls 'civilisation'".
>
> (Comte P. de Barthelémy[1] - 1898)

A. Introduction

This chapter will focus on the features of the rural and urban economy which best illuminate the movements from rural to urban and from traditional to modern which have affected relations between individuals and groups in Laos. The most momentous developments of the past 30 years in Laos have been the spread of new economic activities into many rural areas, including Ban Phon Sung, and the growth of an urban economy whose features owe nothing to Lao invention or practice, but to which many Lao of rural origin have had to adapt. The Lao countryside, therefore, began to offer wealth where previously there was only subsistence, while the city offered economic competition with high stakes and a new set of rules, the rewards of which appeared attractive, though the penalties for losing were severe.

I shall study the rural economy through an analysis of the economic relations of Ban Phon Sung, and the urban through a similar study of Ban

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1. Barthelémy (1898) p. 24 - on visiting a village near Attopeu, southern Laos. (my translation.)

Savang. I shall use the two villages as illustrations of trends in different economic sectors, while conversely using general remarks on the rural and urban economies to illuminate particular aspects of economic relations in Ban Phon Sung and Ban Savang. In both parts I shall focus particularly on the notion of 'wealth' as a motivating force and as an evolving economic concept in Lao terms. Finally, I try to draw some of the principal strands of the rural and urban economies together and sketch the broad lines of their interrelationships. Overall, the main purpose of this chapter, while providing basic economic information, is to lay the foundation on which my subsequent discussion of social and political ideology and practice can rest.

B. The Rural Economy

1. The notion of 'work'

When French travellers first visited Laos, they found the Lao to be 'lazy'. Barthelémy in 1898 wrote, "the Laotian is lazy and bound by routine,"[1] and later, "the Laotian has a horror of work".[2] Modern writers tend to use a slightly different vocabulary, and calculate the number of days spent on "insufficiently productive activities,"[3] or describe despairingly how some Lao farmers, when given rice-seeds which doubled their yields, simply planted half the previous acreage and harvested their usual crop.[4]

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1. Barthelémy (1898) p. 8.
2. Ibid., p. 22.
3. Taillard (1971) p. 134 (see also Chapter Three above).
4. Tablante (1967).

The implication is that the average Lao farmer 'works' an inadequate number of days per year, and that if he 'worked' more he would be less 'poor'.

My use of inverted commas is intended to draw attention to a problem in the use of vocabulary. The economist's conception of 'work' encompasses those activities which contribute towards the production of consumable or saleable commodities, i.e. things which can be used or exchanged for cash or kind. He excludes those activities which produce nothing or actually involve consuming things. The Lao, however, does not make the same distinction. The word viak (usually translated 'work') is best rendered as 'necessary activities', since it includes things like attending religious services, participating in a village festival or going to chat up one's girl-friend. In other words it is appropriate, in Lao terms, to think of a whole range of activities taking place according to various cycles - annual, monthly, daily or the life-cycle of the individual - each activity acquiring priority over others in particular circumstances. For example, when a regular fishing party sets out from the village, and one member is missing, a message will be received to say that "lao khã viak" ("he is detained by work"). This viak may be preparing a ceremony in memory of his mother, mending a leaking roof, going to the market or visiting the next village to arrange his son's marriage. In short, something came up which he deemed more important than the fishing expedition, and his partners, while they might discuss the wisdom of his priorities, would not challenge his right to decide them.

This explanation may seem quite banal, and appear to correspond closely with life in any culture. What distinguishes it, however, from Western practice in particular is the lack of a clear-cut division between 'work' and 'other activities'. In Europe we spend a given

amount of time 'at work', and that time may only be interrupted in exceptional circumstances. 'Work' is conceptually quite distinct from other activities, and it is on this distinction that western notions of productivity are based. Meanwhile, the Lao in town may infuriate his Western colleagues by his cavalier approach to punctuality, just as the farmers infuriate economists by their apparent indifference to production.

How does this come about? Why is it important? To answer these and other related questions it will be useful to provide a brief sketch of the basic economic activities of the villagers of Ban Phon Sung.

2. 'Subsistence' agriculture

The fundamental economic activity of the village is growing an annual crop of glutinous rice. This is done mainly through cultivation in flooded paddy fields, though an important subsidiary quantity is grown on the hill sides surrounding the village by the swidden or 'slash-and-burn' method. The two types of rice are often called 'wet rice' and 'dry rice', though I shall usually refer to 'dry rice' as 'swidden' or 'hill' rice.[1]

In 1973 the villagers of Ban Phon Sung grew about 160 tons of wet rice and 44½ tons of swidden, but many families lost part or all of their swidden rice through flooding. Normally, therefore, production of wet rice would be between two and three times that of swidden,

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1. 'Wet rice' is sometimes called 'paddy rice', but 'paddy' on its own usually refers to unhusked rice, so it is perhaps better to avoid it, except in the phrases 'paddy land' or 'paddy fields'.

although those families who own little paddy land have to concentrate on swidden. Even those families with the best paddy land like to grow some hill rice, however, both as an insurance against disastrous weather in the growing season, and because the hill rice varieties have a pleasant taste which makes a change in the diet.

The work involved in growing each type of rice can be conveniently interspaced. Each operation in the growing of hill rice takes place before its equivalent with wet rice, largely because the swidden plants must be strong enough, when the heavy rains come, to resist being swept away, while the paddy fields must be filled with water from those heavy rains before the rice can be transplanted from the seed beds. However, there are two vital aspects of paddy growing which require intensive labour over a short period and which may necessitate either an exchange of labour with other families or the employment of additional labour from outside.

The first activity of the rice-growing season is the preparation of the swidden fields. In a well established village like Ban Phon Sung this no longer involves the cutting of primary forest, but rather the clearing of a tight secondary growth of small trees and bushes which has grown up since the fields were last used about ten years previously. The clearing is usually done in February, so that the cut wood can dry out in the sun before being burnt where it lies, providing a good ash fertiliser. Fields prepared in this way may be used for two or at the most three seasons depending on the slope (the steeper the slope the more the top soil tends to be eroded during the rains) and the fertility of the soil.

The farmer's next activity is the repair and rebuilding of his paddy dykes, particularly those of the small field to be used as a

nursery bed. This is followed by the burning of the swiddens.

In late April then, after a few showers have moistened the ground fertilised with ash, comes the sowing of the swiddens. Next comes the preparation of the seed beds for the wet rice and then, some time in May or early June, the paddy is sown. The exact timing is decided with one eye on the weather. It must not be too early, so that the seedlings are too advanced by the time the paddy fields are ready to receive them, and it must not be too late, so that the seedlings drown in the seed-beds, or the growing plants are left in the fields without enough water to ripen. As a kind of limited insurance, the farmer plants a number of different varieties, some quicker ripening than others, so that at least part of the crop can hope to have ideal conditions.

The ploughing is done with a metal plough pulled by a water buffalo once the ground has been well soaked by the early rains, so that it turns over easily. Just before the transplanting it is harrowed. In 1974 half a dozen households got together and hired a tractor to do their ploughing, having it done much earlier than those with buffaloes, since the tractor could cope with the harder earth. Also, of course, a tractor cannot step over the dykes which are already in place by the time the buffalo starts ploughing.

Some time in July, ideally, just as the paddy seedlings are getting big enough to transplant, the rain has filled the paddy fields with water to a depth of about 6 inches. The transplanting can then be done. This is back-breaking work which involves pushing the seedlings down into the mud one at a time while standing, of course, in 6 inches of water.

The transplanting is probably the single most important activity

of the growing season and when it is completed the worst of the work is over. All too often, however, it is only a partial success. Either the rains come so late that the seedlings turn yellow in the beds before they can be moved, or the quantity of rain leaves those with fields on higher ground without enough water to transplant, or the seeds have to be resown after being flooded in the nursery beds.

Once the transplanting is finished, though, it remains only to keep the fields free of weeds until harvest in late November/early December, when another burst of activity over a few days concludes the growing season. The swidden rice, of course, has already been harvested in September/October.

Both transplanting and harvesting require short bursts of work from large numbers of people. Since each household's fields will be ready at a different moment, the simplest method is to form an informal work exchange group, where a number of households agree to pool their labour according to a pre-arranged order.

In Ban Phon Sung such arrangements are most often made between relatives, and in the majority of cases work is given simply on a one-to-one reciprocal basis, and no cash or rice changes hands. Children who had left the household to work or study in Vientiane would make a point of returning to the village for a weekend to help their families when the transplanting and harvesting were on. This would earn them a gift of rice to take back to the town with them.

Besides the need to complete the work quickly, people say it is much more fun to work in a large group, and that the work gets done faster. Work is not necessarily given in the direct expectation of return, however, and relatives, particularly the elderly, will be given help if they need it, even if they cannot reciprocate. The village

headman is also offered free assistance in transplanting and harvesting, in recognition of his work for the village.

Some families, however, become involved in more complex arrangements, and households with insufficient land for their needs would rent from those with an excess, on a share-cropping basis. The rates varied as to whether the tenant was a relative, and with who provided the tools, the seeds and the buffaloes, but where a tenant borrowed land, tools, seeds and buffaloes, he might expect to pay up to half the crop to the land-owner.

Twenty-eight households out of the ninety in Ban Phon Sung reported having hired one or more people to help them during the previous agricultural season, on the basis of a negotiated cash or kind payment. In six cases this had involved hiring someone for the entire growing season, estimated at around sixty days work, though the actual number of days worked, and therefore the amount paid, would depend on whether both wet rice and swidden was being grown, and how much work the household members themselves put in. The other 22 families who had paid additional labourers in cash or kind varied from one family that had hired two people for two days each, to others that had hired, for example, 20 people for three days each or six people for 15 days each. The accepted wage for a full day's work by a fast-working adult was 12 kgs of paddy or 500 kip, but this was open to negotiation, and some accepted less. When the person involved was a close relative, who had agreed to "do the rice-field together", the arrangement was more often to split the harvest in pre-arranged shares. In cases where a son, having established a separate household, agreed to work on his father's fields, the sons sometimes claimed not to know how much rice to expect. They would get ''whatever father decides to give".

Some examples of specific arrangements which people arrived at included the following: a widowed mother aged 55 lived with three of her daughters, aged 18, 15 and 11, of whom the youngest was still at school. The mother agreed to work her fields jointly with her eldest daughter (25), who had recently set up house nearby with her husband from outside the village, and who had three children. The main workers in the fields would be the two girls aged 18 and 15 from one household, and the young couple from the other. They agreed to share the crop half and half between the two households.

One of the village schoolteachers had married a local girl, had three small children and lived near his mother-in-law. He had arranged that he and his wife would "do the rice-field together" with his mother-in-law's household, and that this would entitle them to take whatever rice they needed from her granary during the coming year. However, since he was involved with school work, he had to hire a labourer to do most of his part of the work in the fields.

Those who hired labourers, whether for short or long periods, were very much more likely to be from the wealthier households. Taking my criteria for comparative wealth, discussed below, 23 of those who hired labourers were from the 45 wealthiest households and only five were from the less wealthy. Typical of one of the poorer households obliged to hire a labourer throughout the season was that of an old man of 70, living with his divorced daughter of 35, her two children, and three other grandchildren belonging to one of his six sons. All five grandchildren were currently in school. None of his six sons still lived in the village, though two were married into farming families in nearby villages. Of the other four sons, two were soldiers, one a teacher and one a labourer in Vientiane. The family suffered no shortage of land, but there was only one able-bodied worker, the 35

year old woman, available to work it. So they let out some of the fields to a relative, who brought his own buffaloes and tools and paid one-fifth of the crop, and they themselves hired a labourer at an all-in rate of 15,000 kip for the whole season (wet rice cultivation only), which was a bargain. With the help of the two oldest grandchildren (16 and 14) when they were not in school, and an occasional hand from the son who lived in the next village, they harvested a crop that would just see them through the year comfortably, after they had paid the labourer and received the rent from the field let out to a relative.

I did not try to assess the number of man-hours spent in the production of rice, partly because of my distrust of calculations of 'productivity' and 'underemployment' (Chapter Three), and partly because of the difficulty of doing so accurately. Taillard (1971) has made calculations in terms of man-days for two Lao villages on the Nam Ngum river not very far from Ban Phon Sung, and it is worth giving an impression of the amount of work involved in rice cultivation. To take the case of one specific household in Ban Phon Sung: their fields of about two hectares altogether were planted with 72 kgs of seed-rice. Taillard calculates that to cultivate one hectare requires about 120 man-days. This household hired three people for a total of 15 days each, or 45 man-days. The head of the household and his wife each worked about 80 man-days, and the wife's 60 year old father and their 13 year old schoolboy son each gave some help which probably just about made up the remaining 35 man-days.

They harvested 3.6 tons of paddy (1.8 tons per hectare, or 50 kgs per kg of seed rice), of which 540 kgs (45 x 12 kgs) had to be paid to the labourers, leaving them 3,060 kgs. This would convert into about 1,800 kgs of milled rice, after husking. That amount should feed ten average adults for a year, and since their household

consisted of five adults and six children aged from 11 down to one, it should be adequate, without allowing a surplus.

Rice cultivation was, of course, primarily the production of the staple food, and in most cases, such as the example cited above, it was grown to ensure subsistence, and not as a marketable commodity. The reasons for this are discussed below, but it is certain that quite large areas of paddy land were left fallow each year simply because they were marginal lands and not required.

Between the end of December, when the rice is stored in the granary, and the end of March when the whole process starts again, it is sometimes supposed that the whole village participates in an endless series of festivals, marriages and general relaxation. This ignores the need to ensure other aspects of the family's subsistence beyond rice-production. The most important of the many subsidiary economic activities in Ban Phon Sung was fishing. In addition men spent time gathering firewood for a whole year's cooking; building new houses and renovating old ones; repairing agricultural tools and fishing nets. Women were involved in growing vegetables; mending and making clothes. All these activities went on in addition to the preparation and enjoyment of festivals and to the specialised activities in which certain households or individuals participated. For example, in Ban Phon Sung there were two households which distilled rice alcohol, another group had a thriving business in the manufacture of ox-carts, a number engaged in trade of various sorts, others hired themselves out to logging companies. All in all, there did not seem to be able-bodied villagers who sat around doing nothing in the prime working part of the day. Some of their activities may not all have been economically 'productive' according to cash-value criteria, but inactivity was not a feature of Ban Phon Sung.

It will become apparent as we proceed that whereas the possible activities of each villager, apart from growing rice, were once rather limited in range, there are increasing opportunities for him now to spend his life in new and different economic ventures. Nevertheless Ban Phon Sung still gives the impression of a community primarily involved in subsistence agriculture, implying theoretically both the absence of a monetary economy and the lack of a tradeable surplus. The farmer 'subsists' from year to year, consuming directly the fruits of his labours. In fact, as we shall see, Ban Phon Sung's economy by 1974 was more complex than that, and indeed it had probably never been genuinely 'subsistence', though it retained the potential to be so, if circumstances cut the village off from outside sources of trade.

After this rapid look at the annual cycle of economic activities, there follow more detailed accounts of two subsidiary but significant economic activities, fishing and forestry.

3. Subsidiary economic activities

(a) Fishing

Apart from rice, fish is probably the single most important item in the diet of Ban Phon Sung villagers, being eaten either fresh, dried, or fermented into a kind of paste, preserved with salt in large earthenware jars. This substance is called pā dāek, smells awful, but can be delicious once the taste is acquired. It is stored for eating principally during the rainy season when there are few fresh fish and vegetables available, and is also used as a seasoning throughout the year.

The methods used to catch fish and the organisation of fishing parties are interesting indications of the ingenuity of Lao villagers and of the limits and flexibility of their economic and social organisation.

Fishing methods

Fishing methods can be divided into traditional and modern, and further distinguished by whether the fishing is done in a river, a stream, a pond or a paddy field.

In Ban Phon Sung serious fishing was all done in ponds, although the rice fields yielded a few tiny specimens. For fishing in the ponds villagers used a round net about 8 feet in diameter which was weighted at the edges and joined round its circumference by a single string. This was cast onto the surface of the pond (a movement requiring skill and practice) so that it landed flat on the surface and sank to the bottom, the weighted edges of course sinking first. The fisherman then waded in, found the edge of the net resting on the floor of the pond and carefully pulled in the string, until he had the whole circumference of the net drawn up into his hands. He then eased one hand through the top and felt around inside to see if he had caught anything. If he had, he worked around with his fingers until he had the fish firmly in his hand, then withdrew his hand, taking care not to allow any other fish there might be to escape through the hole. He then placed the fish into a round basket made of bamboo which he had attached to his waist by a string, and which had a trap opening at the top which sprang shut when he had put the fish in. This may sound simple, but it was not, and things could go wrong at most stages of the operation. The fish could get away under the net as you were pulling it in. They could bite or scratch as you tried to ease them out of the net, or they could jerk free at the moment of transfer to the basket. They could even leap out of the basket as you were struggling to put the next one in. All in all fishing in this way was a tremendous sport, much enjoyed by the men of the village.[1] It was improved

1. Fishing is a male occupation, though women sometimes come to watch and prepare the lunch.

of course if done in a large group, and this could be organised in a number of ways, as described below.

A refinement which became possible if there were a dozen or so fishermen was to use a large piece of bamboo fencing. In this case four or five men started wading through the pond from one end towards the other banging the water and generally trying to drive the fish up to the other end. When they were nearly there, the other participants waded quickly in with the fencing and planted it in behind the drivers, thus cutting off the fishes' retreat. The nets could then be used in a more confined area with a greater chance of success.

The principal fish in the ponds of Ban Phon Sung were the Pā Khō - Snakehead (Ophicephalus striatus - about 50 cm), the Pā Duk - Catfish (Clarias batrachus - up to 40 cm), the Pā Khāo - Catfish (Wallagonia attu - about 80 cm), the Pā Khaeng - Climbing perch (Anabas testidineus - up to 23 cm), the Pā Salit - Snakeskin Gouramy (Trichogaster Pectoralis - about 15 cm), and the Pā Siu - Minnow (Rasbora myersi - up to 8 cm).[1]

The fish are prepared and eaten in different ways according to their size, taste and boniness, but the Pā Khō is the local favourite for grilling or roasting on a spit, the Pā Salit and Pā Siu are good fried and the others are used in soups or for a spicy minced fish dish, Lāp pā.

Some of the fish, the Pā Khō particularly, survive through the dry season even if the pond dries up completely, by making holes for themselves in the mud, sometimes as much as one metre below the surface. Occasionally fishermen search for them there with sticks. Other tiny

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1. See Alan Davidson (1975) Fish and fish dishes of Laos.

fish survive in this way in dried up paddy fields, where children sometimes try to catch them. When the fields are full of water, though, the children use a conical shaped net with a bamboo handle which is lowered into the water and then pulled up so that the bottom of the cone with luck contains some tiny fish. This method is also used in streams, but is only marginally productive and somewhat scorned by real fishermen, who leave it to the women and children.

The one other method that I saw used in Ban Phon Sung comes into the class of 'modern' fishing. Here an earth dyke was constructed in the middle of a small fish pond. A mechanical pump then drained all the water out of one side of the pond into the other. The fish were then picked up off the mud bottom. The operation was then simply repeated in reverse.

To mention briefly some of the methods employed elsewhere, particularly in rivers and streams: I once saw a girl pick up a large stone and hurl it into the water, and then pick out a stunned fish about 4 inches long from underneath it. A more modern version of this is to throw a hand grenade into a stream, after which the fish simply float to the surface.

The two traditional ways of fishing in a river, however, are with cleverly designed bamboo traps, which allow the fish to swim in with the flow of the river, but do not allow them to turn round and swim out again, and of course with nets from boats. The nets are of varying size, and the techniques and number of boats change depending on the size of the river, the size of the fish and so on.

The organisation of fishing

The fish ponds found in the territory of a village are a most important resource, which may be owned communally or individually. In

some cases a group of households may get together to dig a fish-pond, in which case it is held jointly. Control over the use of community-owned ponds is clearly of great interest to the people and is vested in the village council, on which every household is represented. In Ban Phon Sung there were basically four types of authorisation which the council could give for the use of the ponds:- first, they could declare that a pond was open for all to fish during a certain season. (This applied largely to unsuccessful ponds which were not restocked.) Secondly, they could honour the request of a family to be allowed to fish a particular pond on a given day for a special occasion - almost invariably a wedding or funeral. In this case all the households which intended to participate in the festivity would send at least one member to take part in the fishing. The total catch was contributed to the meal being prepared for the guests. The third way of allocating fishing rights was to announce certain days on which a particular pond might be fished, sometimes on payment of a small sum by each fisherman which would be used to restock the pond. The fourth method was more controversial. The council might decide that a particular community enterprise badly needed funds - the vat needed repairing, or the school needed to be extended. They could then allocate the use of a particular fish pond for an entire season to a group of households willing to pay a large cash sum into the community coffers in advance. While I was there, the best fish pond in the village was allocated in this way to a group of 12 households all from among the 20 wealthiest in the village. Well before the end of the season they had paid off their investment in fish sold for the market in Vientiane, and that was not counting the large quantities retained for home consumption after each day's fishing. The point about this restriction of access to community ponds is that it has only become desirable since the availability of a market for surplus fish. Once adopted, of course, it contributed to ensuring the continued

economic supremacy of those who had political influence in decision-making and who could afford the initial capital outlay, but it was also undoubtedly a source of potential friction in the community.

(b) Forestry

Flying over many parts of Laos the impression is of one great forest, though this was less true in 1977 than it had been in 1968, thanks to the widespread activities of logging companies in the interim.

By 1973 wood was big business in Laos, and its exploitation was the only activity which could be so described. In 1973 official exports of wood were worth 1,939 million kip (US $3.2 million) up from 376 million kip (US $0.75 million) in 1969.[1] 1,939 million kip represented 64% of Laos' national export earnings (29% came from tin and 7% from 'others'). Nevertheless a government forestry official, in a private conversation in late 1973, told me that only about 20% of the wood being exported was actually going through Customs procedures, and being officially recorded.

His description of the wood industry at that time was of an operation run by Thai and Japanese businessmen in collaboration with Lao generals and some top civilian officials. Saddest of all for him was the illegal destruction of the Royal teak forests in Sayaboury province, which, being on the west bank of the Mekong river, allowed easy access for the trucks and elephants of the Thai lumber merchants.

A few weeks later I had two more conversations on the subject in villages near Ban Phon Sung. In the first a villager described how

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1. Royaume du Laos (1973).

saw-mill agents, attracted by a stand of wood, went to the village leaders concerned and offered a price. The village leaders had no option but to accept it, since the agents made clear that they would take the wood whether authorised or not. If the villagers objected, they could not complain to the military or civilian authorities, since the saw-mill owners had already made the necessary arrangements with them.

My second conversation was with a young Royal Lao Army lieutenant stationed in a village which bordered territory controlled by the Pathet Lao. Since the cease-fire eleven months previously there had been some contact between the two garrisons, and on one occasion both sets of soldiers had gone down into a village to celebrate a festival together.

The Pathet Lao soldiers, however, were taking an interest in the logging work and had declared large areas of the forest off limits. These were not areas which were considered Pathet Lao territory, but their men were capable of mounting dangerous operations there, as they had shown on one occasion. Then they had warned a team cutting trees inside the off-limits area not to return. When the team was sent back to the same place anyway, they were ambushed and two of the five men killed.

The lieutenant described how his colonel was preparing a battalion specially to defend the wood-cutters, but he, the lieutenant, knew that two battalions would be quite insufficient to prevent the Pathet Lao from mounting an occasional ambush, and he was scornful of how "since the fighting stopped, our soldiers have become mercenaries of the merchants".

High on the list of accusations made by students against senior Royal Lao Government officials after the cease-fire in 1973 was that

of profiting personally from the illegal exploitation of forest resources. In fact it became clear that the merchants had seized the opportunity of the cease-fire for one last frantic rush to get whatever they could while opportunities lasted. Throughout 1973 and 1974, therefore, timber lorries raced up and down the roads from the interior to Vientiane and other border towns. The lumber merchants and their agents became the important men in the district. At the village festivals they vied for places of honour with district governors and army colonels.

A few villagers had managed to jump on the bandwagon. The sub-district chief of a neighbouring Tasseng owned a logging truck, and delivered on a piece by piece basis to the local sawmill. His villagers sometimes complained they could never get their papers signed because he was always away on business. In Ban Phon Sung itself there were two trucks which had been used when the stands of Ban Phon Sung's territory had been cut, but operations were now taking place deeper in the forests, and when the trucks could be made to go, they would more often be used just to haul firewood for village families. Their activities of the previous few years, however, had transformed the building materials employed in Ban Phon Sung. Bamboo had given way to fine hard wood in many floors, walls and ceilings.

Although the logging operations were a one-off unrepeatable activity, they were an important aspect of the modernisation of the rural economy and the integration of villagers into a wider economic network. At the same time they had a significant impact on attitudes. They taught people that, as one villager wistfully put it, "Anybody can be bought". The greed, the lack of respect for village rights and the power of money which the operations demonstrated were initially shocking and then sobering to many villagers. It would have a consider-

able effect on how they viewed the world in the future.

4. Evolving economic conditions

(a) National education and the developmental cycle of the domestic group

Before the introduction of general primary education and the possibility of secondary education, the optimum position in the developmental cycle of the domestic group - the period of greatest prosperity for each household - was when the household contained the lowest percentage of unproductive dependants (elderly people and small children). This probably coincided in most cases with the marriage of the head's elder daughter, when one or both of her grandparents were already dead. Her youngest siblings were already of some help in the fields, and her husband had moved in to work with the household, but they had as yet no children of their own.

Fig. 1

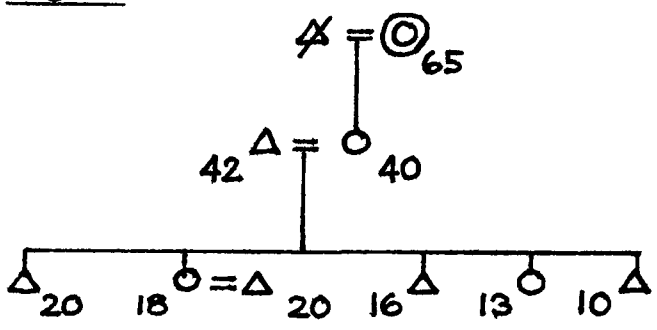
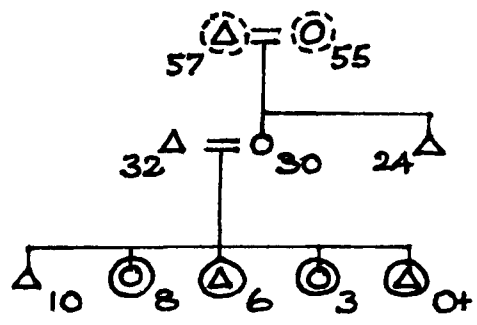


Fig. 2



Figs. 1 & 2 Hypothetical household diagrams to illustrate the developmental cycle of the Lao domestic group

The household might look something like Fig. 1, with only one member unproductive. Compare this with the picture of this household ten years previously (Fig. 2). Even assuming the labour contribution of the wife's unmarried brother, and considering her parents as retired and semi-productive, the ratio of 8 : 1 in favour of the productive was then only 5 : 4. Provided that there were sufficient resources avail-

able to allow the increased productive potential of this household to be realised, one could expect them to increase their economic standing significantly over the period between the situations illustrated in Figs. 2 and 1.

However, the introduction of national education made prediction of comparative economic performance, and assessment of the optimum moment in the cycle, far more difficult. To take the household in Fig. 1 again, the 20 year old boy might be: an urban worker able to provide cash support to his family, a student requiring support from his family, or a peasant farmer like his father. The same possibilities are open to his sister's husband and to his 16 year old brother. His two youngest siblings are almost certainly full-time pupils at school, who can provide only occasional help with agricultural labour, and who in addition need school uniform and equipment - paper and pencils. The demands on the household's annual food production, on their accumulated wealth and on their capacity for subsidiary earning depend enormously, therefore, on the occupations of the various members. Conversely, of course, the household's economic station will largely determine how many members can be supported for how long in full-time education. It seems reasonable to suppose that in these circumstances the spread of national education contributes to a widening of the wealth differentials in rural villages, since a household with a slight economic advantage could push one or two sons through school, who would later be in a position to raise the economic status of the family considerably.

(b) The influence of a monetary economy

As I have already indicated, I doubt whether Ban Phon Sung, or villages like it, have ever had truly closed subsistence economies. First, there is evidence that silver bars have been in use in the region both as currency for a limited number of exceptional payments

and as a repository for wealth for several hundred years. Secondly, certain essential commodities such as salt and cotton are not produced locally, and thirdly certain villages in the area have clearly been producers of specialised items such as tobacco, ox-carts, rice whisky, or particular varieties of fruit or vegetables for some considerable time already. All the signs therefore are that a moderate barter trade between different villages in the Vientiane plain has been an essential feature of the rural economy for several hundred years, and it is equally most probable that in times of peace and prosperity there has been some trade outside the region in a few luxury items.

The introduction of paper money in the past 30 years, however, and the financial support given to the money from outside the country, have had a considerable effect on the economic relations of the village. The range of items available to the villager in exchange for cash or surplus production has expanded enormously (medicines, food, transport, radios, watches, lamps, clothing, etc.), and many of the items are slowly making the transition in the village economy from desirable luxuries to recognised essentials. At the same time goods produced or found in the village have become marketable. The three most significant are rice, wood and fish. Whereas in earlier times the most economic thing to do with a few fish left over after the household had eaten was to offer them to a neighbour (in the expectation of return at a later date), it now became possible to sell them to an intermediary, who took them to Vientiane for sale in the market.

One result of this change has been a tendency for each household to become more independent as an economic unit within the village, while increasing its links with outside economic agents. This would appear to reduce the openings for poor households to borrow from richer ones in the expectation that debts can be repaid at a more productive

time in the domestic cycle. Such contractual arrangements are still entered into, particularly with a major enterprise such as the building of a house, but the marketability of village produce outside the village, and the desirability of obtaining goods from the town, inevitably reduce the amounts of surplus produce available for redistribution within the village. Once again, therefore, a new feature of the modern rural economy has had the effect of increasing wealth differentiation between village families. At a social level older people, particularly those in poorer families, say that the new outlets for individual economic enterprise have made people mean (khĭ thĭ).

(c) National economic policy and foreign aid

The extent to which peasant farmers are able to benefit materially from increasing integration into international economies depends largely on questions of national economic policy, such as levels of taxation, import controls and raw material prices. In the case of villages in the Vientiane plain, the special circumstances of Laos' post-Second World War history play an important role. In fact recent events have offered villages like Ban Phon Sung the benefits of a certain modernisation with a minimal outlay on the part of the villagers themselves, although some households have benefitted much more substantially than others.

Unlike Vietnam, Laos was a French colony which was not expected to pay for itself.[1] Head taxes were raised sporadically, occasional corvée labour demanded, but the rural economy was only marginally affected, quite unlike the wholesale reorganisation of rural life that took place between 1900 and 1945 in Vietnam, when a population of

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1. cf. Lévy (1974) pp. 74-75.

middle peasant farmers was transformed into one of wage-earning labourers on farms and plantations.[1] As a result, when Lao independence was achieved in 1954, all that had happened was that some villages had begun to take modest steps into the modern market economy. What transformed the situation was the subsequent civil war and US government support for the anti-communist and anti-neutralist causes. With American funds available, the Royal Lao Government did not need to risk alienating the peasantry by raising taxation.[2] Only a nominal duty was collected on imports, which were subsidised by special dollar-kip foreign exchange operations and a programme called the United States Commodity Import Program (UNIP). This programme was based on the idea that if an army and a civil service were to be recruited they would have to be paid, and that the soldiers and officials would need something to spend their money on.

The development experts of USAID also found that the area of the country in which they could safely operate was limited, while the funds at their disposal were considerable. Although large amounts were creamed off by the emergent urban bureaucracy, the rural areas close to Vientiane were bound to benefit, and particularly village leaders who established political relationships with the new urban elite.

Finally, during the war, the areas which escaped the immediate effects of the conflict and were able to ensure their continued subsistence in food, found, in a sense, that the rest was pure profit. Any surplus production fetched a good price, casual periods of wage labour

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1. cf. Keyes (1977) p. 210 for a good summary.

2. Taillard (1977a) p. 90 rightly points out that failure to raise taxation widened the psychological gap between state government and rural villages. (See Chapter Six.)

were possible, and most development schemes required little or no input from the villagers.

(d) The loss of rural self-sufficiency

It should be noted, however, that while Ban Phon Sung continued to ensure its own subsistence, it was gradually losing its self-sufficiency, as the number of 'essentials' in a villager's life increased, as the convenience and cheapness of imported goods made some traditional economic activities no longer worthwhile, and as scarce natural resources which proved to have an export market began to dry up. To take an example of each: sophisticated health care became an essential, weaving cloth at home was more expensive than buying ready-made clothes, and local fuels began to get scarce.

(i) Health

The penetration of modern health care facilities into the rural areas, and the continuing importance of the various traditional practitioners, are subjects about which separate books should be written. In the crudest terms traditional Lao medicine was divided into practices which involved mediation with an unfriendly spirit world, and practices which involved the application or consumption of concoctions made from animal or vegetable sources.[1] What is important here is that the services of traditional practitioners were not expensive, and most only required payment if the treatment was successful.[2]

Western medicine was not immediately accepted in Lao villages, or even in the towns, as the answer to every problem.

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1. For an introduction to the latter practices, see Pottier (1972).

2. Condominas (1962) pp. 99-114 has a good introduction to the activities of the various practitioners.

Indeed the suspicion in which it was held, and the resistance by influential traditional practitioners, often meant that patients were only taken to hospital when they were near death. This in its turn meant that a high proportion of patients inevitably died in hospital, thereby further increasing doubts about the efficacy of western treatment.

In Ban Phon Sung, however, the possibilities of western medicine had been quite well accepted by 1974, and this may have been due largely to the influence of one villager who had become a senior medical assistant in a Vientiane hospital. Twice, while I was in the village, people who had been taken ill suddenly were driven to Vientiane by specially hired car within a few hours of the illness presenting itself! In both cases, traditional healers had at once been called in, and in one the spirit doctor (mǭ mon) diagnosed that the patient's mother (recently dead) was feeling neglected and required offerings to be made. Nevertheless the patient was taken to Vientiane the same afternoon, where meningitis was diagnosed and successfully treated.[1]

In such cases the patient was driven not to the hospital but straight to the house of the medical assistant from the village. Some would actually stay there throughout the treatment. Despite the great benefit which many villagers obtained from the expertise and generosity of this man, he could not save them from the expenses involved in protracted

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1. These decisions were taken without any intervention on my part.

treatment. Local health facilities were virtually non-existent, and it was recognised that anything at all serious required a journey to Vientiane, not only for the patient, but for one or two close relatives as well. Once there, medicines had to be paid for, and consulting fees met.

While this awareness of the value of modern treatment had certainly been generally advantageous in Ban Phon Sung, there were cases where the benefit was doubtful. I was introduced to one young man whose father had died shortly before my arrival, after two years of almost continuous treatment in Vientiane hospitals. According to his account, they had been one of the wealthiest families in the village, but the expenses of medical treatment had obliged them to sell off livestock, land and possessions, to the point where, after the funeral they retained just enough land for their own needs, and three buffaloes to pull the plough, although they were still in debt. The young man wondered what value those two extra years of painful life had been to his father, and whether he would not have preferred to die quietly two years before.

In brief, health care is an important field in which the village is no longer self-sufficient, and for which each household tries to make allowances in its budget.

(ii) Clothing

Up until 1960 every house had its loom and its spinning wheel, both in regular use. Girls approaching marriageable age spent long hours sitting under the house weaving, especially during the slack agricultural season, their purpose to prepare for themselves a handsome wardrobe and with luck so impress a young man with their artistry and his parents with their industry that

a satisfactory husband might be attracted.

One of the first cheap imports to flood the market in the early 1960s was printed cloth from Hong Kong and Japan. The patterns were modern, no labour was required and initially the price of an imported skirt was less than that of the raw materials required to make the same article at home. The practice of weaving ceased to be universal and became a specialist art, in which the women of a few villages continued to produce fine work for ceremonial occasions, and where a girl's traditional weaving production before marriage was reduced to the embroidery of one or two skirt hems which she would sew on to a length of bought material.

When imports were no longer being subsidised, and later when the foreign exchange support collapsed, bringing inflation and devaluations, the price of imported cloth rose dramatically, and by 1974 women in Ban Phon Sung were beginning to reassemble looms which in some cases had not been used for 15 years. Unfortunately, of course, the old supply lines had to be completely rebuilt. Farmers had stopped growing cotton, the dyes were no longer being made. The self-sufficiency which had seemed unnecessary in the modern technological world suddenly began to seem more desirable, but would prove hard to recapture.

(iii) Fuels

Where it would prove much harder, perhaps impossible, to recapture self-sufficiency, was then irreplaceable natural resources were used up. This was most evident with forest products. The massive exploitation of hard woods had made

parts of the Vientiane plain resemble nothing so much as a World War I scene by Nash. One of the results for the villagers of Ban Phon Sung was that the resinous oils from certain gum trees with which they used to fuel their lamps were no longer available, since all the oil-bearing trees had been cut down and sold. This did not matter until the government was no longer able to import kerosense, and then Ban Phon Sung after dark became a very quiet place. Once again the abandonment of an aspect of self-sufficiency had back-fired owing to the precarious nature of Laos' integration into the international economy, and since Ban Phon Sung's ability to pay for imported goods depended on 'windfall' inputs of foreign exchange from abroad.

5. 'Wealth' in Ban Phon Sung

(a) Introduction to the survey

I have already discussed (Chapter One) the problems of obtaining accurate statistics in Laos. I have also mentioned (Chapter Three) the dangers of using western economic measurements to produce useful information about Lao society. In particular it is clear that in rural Lao society the notion of 'productivity' calculated on the basis of cash market values would be foreign to most Lao farmers, even after twenty years of gradual penetration by elements of a monetary economy. The idea that one might abandon growing rice because more money could be earned fishing was not entertained in Ban Phon Sung.

Villagers did, however, have clear ideas about wealth, and universally, I think, wished to become wealthier. The problem facing me, therefore, was how to obtain information about who was wealthier

than the others and why; how much difference there was between rich and poor; and how patterns of wealth accumulation and distribution were developing under the influence of a modernising rural economy.

I decided first of all to include in my household survey questions designed to elicit indications of wealth and then to establish a points system which would allow me to make comparisons. The questions asked were under the headings: (i) number of livestock (buffaloes, cows, pigs, chickens, ducks); (ii) capital goods (car, motorcycle, bicycle, radio); and (iii) rice-fields. Each item under the first two headings was assigned a points value based on the market cash value at the time (1,000 kip - 1 point), as under:

Buffalo	150	Car	1,200
Cow	80	Motorcycle	450
Pig	15	Bicycle	100
Chicken	2	Radio	15
Duck	3	Rice Seed, per kg.	3

It proved difficult to measure the size of rice-fields, since no accurate measure of surface area was in use. (The word lai, which in Thailand is a unit of 0.4 acre, simply means a paddy field in Ban Phon Sung, of whatever size.) An approximation could be obtained by asking how many baskets of seed (12 kgs) would be required to sow all the fields possessed by the household. This was more reasonable than asking how much rice was usually harvested or had been harvested in a given year, since a number of families did not regularly plant all their fields, and each individual harvest was subject to the vagaries of the weather. Even the quantities of seed used, however, did not allow for the varying quality, unit size or location of the fields.[1]

1. It is recognised that yields per kg of seed may vary from 30-120 kgs depending on soil fertility. In Ban Phon Sung the range was probably about 40-70 kgs.

On the basis that each kg. of seed-rice would product an average 50 kg of paddy and that the approximate value of 50 kgs of paddy was 3,000 kip, I counted three points for each kg of seed-rice that a household would use if planting all their fields.

A few initial comments are in order. First, I did not try to assess monthly or annual income, primarily because of the difficulties of doing so accurately, although this would clearly have been an important indication of the degree to which integration into the market economy had been effected. Secondly, I did not assess the value of the family house or of its furnishings. As I have already indicated, there was little variation in house design, and without using a purely subjective valuation, it would have been impossible to make realistic distinctions; and thirdly, I have made no allowance for the comparative age or state of repair of the items recorded. Perhaps the most glaring example is that of one of the 'cars', which was a fine 30-seater bus in excellent working order, while another 'car' was a broken down old timber lorry which could occasionally be made to go. Both were accorded the same points value, since I felt it better not to get involved with intricate evaluation of the relative merits of a sick old buffalo and a newly-born ox-calf.

Finally, and perhaps most seriously, I am aware that the list includes both 'productive' items and 'consumer' items, and some, such as the 'car', which might be either or both. As a result, and bearing in mind my caveats above, it will be obvious that the 'results' of this survey should be treated with the greatest caution. They are intended to give the most general idea of comparative wealth, calculated on the basis of possessions in which the Ban Phon Sung householder liked to invest, either as working capital, a long-term insurance policy or as indicators of wealth for the purpose of acquiring social prestige.

Most important, perhaps, the examination of the data obtained from this survey has allowed me to make discoveries about the way in which the rural economy is developing, which I might otherwise have overlooked.

(b) General results

Table 5 below gives the quantities of material possessions declared by the 90 households in the village, with the average holdings per household and the number of 'wealth' points. Table 6 presents the total potential rice production of the village and the actual production in 1973, compared with total food needs in rice for the population of 579 people.

Table 5 Ban Phon Sung - Material possessions

Items	Points value	Total number of items in the village	Average per household
Buffaloes	(150)	422	4.69
Cows	(80)	264	2.93
Pigs	(15)	193	2.14
Chickens	(2)	797	8.85
Ducks	(3)	79	0.87
Cars/Trucks	(1200)	4	0.04
Rice-mill	(600)	1	-
Motorcycles	(450)	5	0.06
Bicycles	(100)	33	0.35
Radios	(15)	53	0.58
Baskets seed	(36)	723	8.14
Total wealth points		126,919	1,410

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Table 6 Ban Phon Sung - Rice production

	Seeds (kgs)	Paddy (tons)	Milled (tons)
Total possible paddy rice production	8796	440	264
Total rice production 1973		205	120
Total annual rice needs 579 persons			105
Approx. surplus 1973			15
Potential maximum surplus			159

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The interest in these figures, however, is not so much in the totals achieved, but in the distribution of the wealth among the households. Bare statistics show that the highest number of points scored by a single household was 5,358 against an average of 1,410, while two households scored no points at all. That it to say that whereas one household owned 18 buffaloes, 6 cows, 3 pigs, 10 chickens, 2 ducks, a car, a bicycle, a radio and fields to absorb 22 baskets of rice-seed, two families owned none of these things and no rice-fields.

Table 7 gives an indication of how wealth is distributed in the village. The unit of account is the household (defined in Chapter One), but naturally households vary in size. The average household size in Ban Phon Sung is 6.43 persons, but actual numbers range from one to 13. For the purposes of the calculations of comparative wealth per head, children under 5 have not been included, since their effect on either production or consumption is considered negligible. This means that average household size, after the elimination of 98 small children, was 5.34 persons. By drawing up a 'wealth points' list, the 90 households were divided into 10 groups of 9, both by household wealth and by wealth per head. The average household size is given beside the figures for

Table 7 Ban Phon Sung - Percentage of village wealth owned by richer and poorer households

	Wealth per household		Wealth per head		
	% of wealth owned	Average household	% of wealth owned	Average household	Average wealth points
1- 9	25.2	7.66	20.8	5	587
10-18	16.7	6.33	13.4	4.56	414
19-27	14.2	6.78	15.8	6.22	358
28-36	11.5	5.22	13.5	6	316
37-45	9.2	4.11	11.1	5.78	272
46-54	8.2	5.44	8.0	5.11	220
55-63	6.9	5.78	7.5	5.89	179
64-72	4.7	4.78	6.0	6.22	136
73-81	3.0	4.44	3.2	5	92
82-90	0.4	2.9	0.7	3.66	27
	100		100		

each group. The total wealth points owned by each group of 9 households was divided by the total wealth points for the whole village (126,919) to determine the percentage of village wealth owned by each group. Thus the top 10% of households owned 25.2% of the wealth, but were of considerably above-average size (7.66 persons). The top 10% of households taken on the basis of wealth per head owned 20.8% of village wealth, but had an average of only 5 persons.

The following sections discuss the questions of wealth accumulation and distribution from a number of angles, making use of the survey data where appropriate.

(c) The acquisition and transmission of wealth

In villages like Ban Phon Sung paddy land is inherited by the descendants of those who cleared the virgin forest and prepared the fields. After the land had first been cleared, the fields were farmed initially by the swidden method, while gradually over the years a greater and greater area was flattened out and equipped with earth dykes. Such a settlement, successfully begun, naturally attracted friends and relatives from the founder's previous village. The lands offered to them would be less well situated, but they had the benefit of the security of the settlement as they cleared their fields. At this stage the extent of the fields claimed by each family depended on the size of their active work force. If the work force should increase, new lands could be opened up, not necessarily contiguous with the old. Problems arose only when the area under cultivation could no longer be extended, either because it would infringe on land claimed by other villages, or because villagers feared that to push the forest any further back would reduce the revenue from hunting and the sources of firewood, or because no more paddy land could be prepared within a reasonable distance of the village.

At this point the village population had reached its maximum and families which could no longer support themselves sent out some young members to found new villages. This presented little problem in the past, since land was plentiful. However, with the increasing pressure on land in the Vientiane plain in the 1960s, both from rapid natural increase, and from the arrival of refugees from the war zone seeking temporary homes, attractive land anywhere in the Vientiane Plain became hard to find.

Land is transmitted in Ban Phon Sung from parents to children without distinction of age or sex. In fact it is most often divided mainly among daughters since sons are more likely to marry into another village and take moveable property as their part of the inheritance. Uxorilocal residence immediately after marriage is normal (although by no means mandatory) until the next daughter is ready to marry, when the elder couple establishes itself neolocally, usually nearby. The youngest daughter therefore inherits the house and looks after her parents in their old age. Since this is considered an obligation, she may well receive a more than average share in her parents' property, although otherwise everything is divided equally, and as far as possible in accordance with the children's wishes. Those who have left the village and not maintained contact may be eliminated from consideration.

While new land is still available within a reasonable distance, a large family is obviously a good investment for any parents, for it allows them to increase their landholdings. In addition, numerous offspring consolidate the parents' social position in the village with relation to other families. Being blessed with many healthy children is a sign of <u>bun</u> or religious merit. When the limit of village

expansion is reached, however, the rational decision would seem to be to have fewer children, since there is no longer unlimited land in the region. With the introduction of national education, whereby an asset - an able-bodied teenage child - was turned into a liability - a student, then the arguments for limiting one's family would seem to be even stronger. Instead, what happened over much of rural Laos was that the penetration of modern medicine affected infant mortality, so that more children survived than previously, while the 'windfall' (and temporary) increases in the standard of living during the 1960s encouraged people to believe that the previous land-people ratios no longer applied. Indeed during that period, when children showed far more interest in wage-earning jobs than tilling the land, there appeared to be no need for each child to be guaranteed a parcel of land. In 1973 and 1974, however, the fragility of the economic boom began to be apparent to the villagers, the price of imported goods shot up and town-dwelling cousins were transformed from benefactors into dependants. Then some villagers began to interest themselves in family planning, since their ten children no longer appeared to be the economic blessing they had once anticipated.

The figures in the survey, however, would seem to indicate that in 1974 it was still an advantage to have a large family, since the average household size of the top 50% in wealth per head was still greater than that of the bottom 50% (5.51 to 5.17). In other words, you were still more likely to be well-off, as an individual, if you were part of a large household than in a small one. I suspect, however, that this finding is misleading, and as I shall suggest later, the important consideration seems to be the age of the household head, which is indicative of the stage reached in the domestic cycle. Taking the lists of comparative wealth per head there is only one household head in

in the top 30 who is under 40, and he runs the local shop with his wife, who, most unusually, is ten years older than him. In the bottom 60, however, there are 22 household heads under 40. Furthermore, if we look at the average age of household heads, the average age of the top 40 is 51.5 years, and that of the bottom 40, 43.9 years.

Household size taken on its own may be, therefore, a misleading indicator of economic advantage. More significant is position in the domestic cycle, discussed below. Perhaps the most advantageous position of all, however, was enjoyed by those who had inherited all the land of their parents, either because they had no siblings or because their siblings had moved away. The two wealthiest couples in Ban Phon Sung (by household) had no siblings living in the village, although all four individuals had been born there.

(d) The achievement of wealth

If the first prerequisites for wealth in Ban Phon Sung are ascribed (ideally being sole beneficiary of a founding village family), what is the influence, more difficult to assess, of achievement?

First of all, what does a Lao villager wish to achieve? I have described how some villagers, introduced to new high-yielding varieties of rice, simply halved the area of paddy under cultivation, and produced a subsistence crop with half the effort. This sort of example requires comments on motivation and values.

Quite simply a Lao farmer, like anybody else, weighs up the benefit to be gained from undertaking a given activity. When the benefit outweighs the required input, then the effort is made. The scale of values by which the potential benefit is measured, however, is naturally not identical to that of Western industrial economics.

Some writers have therefore tried to identify a 'Lao scale of values' which would explain villagers' reactions.[1] It is hardly surprising, however, particularly in a time of rapid change, that there is no uniform scale of values. Values change under the influence of external stimuli and the development of the local situation, but they do not change uniformly. The values espoused by children who have had six years of primary education are not those of their fathers who spent a few months learning to chant sutras in a Buddhist temple, or of their mothers whose total horizons were often the village and its fields. Nor did all the fathers or all the mothers react in the same way, when faced with economic and social innovations.

Meanwhile values naturally change more slowly than economic reality. In this case the new economic incentives, which most young people appreciated with the benefit of their education, were not seen by all parents as desirable. Some saw them as a source of potential confusion and disruption. The songs that could be heard over a radio were quite different from those which villagers sang at festivals. A radio was not therefore necessarily a desirable object. Only the very poorest families in Ban Phon Sung could not afford a radio, but only 18 out of the 30 wealthiest households possessed one, while 16 of the 30 poorest had one. If attitudes to modern material possessions remained ambivalent, the same was true as to the accumulation of very large quantities of traditional wealth symbols. One farmer owned 36 cows, but one of his fellow villagers confided in me that he didn't understand the man. What on earth could he want with 36 cows?

The first prerequisite for the acquisition of wealth was therefore

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1. E.g. Condominas' (1962) identification of 'the bǭ pen nyang philosophy' (see Chapter Three).

simply to desire it. We shall find that those who have achieved wealth were those who, having a certain inherited economic base from which to set out, were temperamentally ready to make the effort required to achieve it. As attitudes evolved, more people probably began to appreciate the advantages, but by the time some of them realised what they were missing, the motivated wealth-seekers had obtained a decisive advantage which they would not relinquish lightly.

(e) What sort of people are wealthy?

Looking more closely at the information in my survey, it seemed useful to compare three groups in the wealth table. These are (i) the ten richest households, (ii) the ten having just below average wealth (Nos. 38-47 in order of wealth), and (iii) the ten poorest.

Table 8 Ban Phon Sung - Household possessions according to wealth groups

	Top ten	Mid ten	Bottom ten
Buffaloes	12	4	-
Cows	8	3	-
Pigs	2	2	1
Chickens	11	8	7
Ducks	4	3	3
Motorcycle	1	-	-
Bicycle	-	1	-
Radio	1	1	-
Baskets rice seed	13	7	1
Average household size	7.6 pers.	4.4 pers.	2.8 pers.
Average wealth points per household	3437	1262	74
Adjusted wealth points per head	452	287	26

The first thing to notice is that the apparently grinding poverty of the bottom ten is fortunately for the most part an illusion. Five of the ten couples are young, recently married and still economically part of their parents' households. Of the remainder, two of the husbands are older men recently moved in to marry younger village girls. The girls can expect a moderate inheritance eventually and therefore also remain partly dependent on the girl's parent's family. One household is that of a soldier who presumably has a small cash income, which has not been assessed. The small average household size shows that most of these families are just beginning on a new domestic cycle. Two households, however, appear to be genuinely very poor. Of these one is a recently arrived couple in their 50s, who are refugees from the war about 100 kms further north. They are unique in having been allowed to build a house in the village although they have no relatives there. They have been allotted some swidden land to farm, and their children are in their early 20s, so they should soon establish themselves. There is really only one village household, therefore, which appears to be genuinely very poor. The household head's mother still lives next door with other children and her household is only slightly less poor. Both households cultivate swidden rice but have no paddy fields. Only one brother, married to another local girl and living in a separate household, has achieved a certain level of prosperity.

As suggested by the small household size, a comparison of the ages of the household heads shows that those in the bottom ten are on average some 15 years younger.

Table 9 Ban Phon Sung - Average age of household heads by wealth group

	Top ten	Mid ten	Bottom ten
Age range (Inner 8)	42-53	46-60	25-43
Average age	46.7	51.0	34.5

One final point is perhaps worth making about the bottom ten. As a group the heads of these poor households have spent a remarkable amount of time as Buddhist monks. Although the top ten are considerably older than the bottom group, only three of their number have been monks - averaging five years each, while four of the middle ten have spent an average of eight years each in a monastery. Among the bottom ten, though, seven men have spent an average of four years each in the vat, which is much higher than the average for their age-group. This confirms the feeling that the vat is not the best place for learning to get rich!

The interesting comparisons, therefore, are between the middle households and the rich, and the middle families would be considered, in the majority of Lao villages, to have a very comfortable standard of living. Fields in which to sow 7 baskets of seed-rice is enough to feed any family, and 4 buffaloes and 3 cows provide solid available capital to back any new investment, or to be converted in the case of celebration or disaster. We are therefore comparing a group of households which are adequately provided for in present-day rural Lao terms, with a group which has possessions worth approximately three times as much. What are some of the features which distinguish the two groups?

(f) The wealthy and the comfortably off

The logical starting-point would seem to be the size of rice-fields, and here it is interesting to note that although two of the top ten possess rice-fields considerably larger than anybody else's (approximately 10 and 7 hectares respectively - the next highest is 5), there is not otherwise much difference between the groups. The average of the next 8 is 3.2 hectares (range 2-5), while the average of the top 8 of the middle ten is 2.8 (range 1.8-4.7). Where rice-fields are a crucial factor is in the bottom ten, eight having no fields at all,

although most may expect to inherit some eventually.

An initial conclusion about wealth in Ban Phon Sung might be: that enough paddy fields to ensure subsistence is a prerequisite of an adequate standard of living, but that wealth (possessions three times as valuable as the average) is not otherwise directly related to the size or quality of a family's fields.

The second point to investigate would seem to be education, and related to it the question of age and position in the domestic cycle. Here the top ten households are remarkably uniform. In almost all, the parents are around 45 years old with 4-7 children, of whom the eldest are in their early 20s. In other words the elder children have been productive for several years, while the parents are still in the prime of life. These households are all close to the optimum moment in the domestic cycle. The middle group is less homogenous, on average somewhat older, with the eldest children dispersed some time ago, but the younger children still dependent, and part of their wealth perhaps already spent on marriage feasts and bride-wealth.

In terms of education there is no significant variation between the two groups at the level of the parents. Fathers have either a few years in the vat or no education at all, mothers invariably have no education at all. Among the children, the average age in the top group is 13.2 for 58 children and in the middle group 16.6 years for 49 children. One would expect the top group, $3\frac{1}{2}$ years younger, to have more children presently in school but a lower average length of schooling to date. This turns out to be the case:

Table 10 Ban Phon Sung - Educational achievement by wealth groups

	Top ten	Mid ten
Total number of children	58	49
Number now in school	33	15
Number not yet started school	7	6
Number having no schooling	3	5
Total having some school education	47	33
Average years spent in school	3.91	4.24
Number having attended vat only	1	5
Number having attended vat and school	1	4

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It can be safely assumed that in $3\frac{1}{2}$ years' time, when the top ten group have reached the present average age of the mid ten group, they will have clearly overtaken them in scholastic achievement. The numbers among the top group who have spent time in the vat may also rise. On the whole, while the top group has a clear lead in modern education, the distinction is not a glaring one.

One could perhaps draw two conclusions from the evidence on education and ages: First, that the optimum point in the domestic cycle for the possession of wealth is when one's eldest children are about to get married. Secondly, one can say that the children of wealthy families are likely to progress further in the modern educational system than those of middle families. This may be for a combination of reasons: the children may be more intelligent, the families may put more store by education, and the richer families can obviously afford to support their children longer in school, but it would seem fair to say that the villagers who have achieved wealth have placed greater emphasis on the modern education of their children, perceiving that by that route wealth can be consolidated and translated into political and social advantage.

Where the distinction between the two groups really shows is under the heading 'occupation'. Although all 20 household heads claim the title Phǭ Nā (farmer), seven of the top ten are in addition Phǭ Khā (merchant or businessman). All the businesses of any importance run from the village apart from the rice-mill (its owner is just outside the top ten) are represented, the group including the only shop-keeper, the owner of the bus, the manufacturer of rice whisky, the charcoal merchant, the ox-cart manufacturers and two general traders dealing in timber among other things. None of the household heads in the middle ten group calls himself a Phǭ Khā or runs an outside business of this kind.

I have noted that all these top men are about the same age. They do not themselves have notably more education than others, but in nine out of the ten cases both they and their wives were born in Ban Phon Sung and inherited good land. It is clear that, relying on a solid economic base in the village, they have seized the opportunities available during the 1960s to engage in profitable side-lines to farming. Their comparative wealth is the result. It may be wondered, though, whether those young men now starting their families will have the same opportunities. The evidence is that they will find it much more difficult. First, they have, on average, more siblings to compete with. Secondly, not only has the village reached the limits of its expansion in size, but the national economy is now in recession. And thirdly, it seems that the families which have acquired wealth are keen to establish ways in which their position of economic supremacy may be maintained. One example of how they have sought to do this is through the control of fishing rights, as described above.

(g) Interim conclusions

To bring together some of the points discussed so far, Ban Phon Sung

is obviously a village which, given reasonable weather, has an adequate general standard of living. While it receives virtually no services from the central government, neither do farmers pay any tax and most households have a reserve of valuable possessions on which to build or on which to call in a crisis. Most of the poorer households tend to be young, and many are still partly dependent on parents. The number of genuinely poor households is extremely few, perhaps two or three. In the past twenty years, however, a certain number of individuals (15-20) have taken advantage of a temporary economic boom to acquire wealth for their households several times the village average. While the wealth can only in the most indirect way be said to have been acquired at the expense of other villagers (by destruction of village forests etc.), there are signs that those who have acquired that wealth may plan to maintain their advantage more directly at the expense of others (by limited access to resources).

Having tackled the question of who becomes rich and how, it may be worth briefly posing that of why anyone should want to be rich in the first place, a point touched on above, and which will be of concern in later chapters.

6. Motivation and the modernisation of the rural economy

The city of Vientiane is 50 kms from Ban Phon Sung. By 1974 Vientiane had nearly 200,000 inhabitants. The villagers of Ban Phon Sung could take a bus every morning of the week and reach the city in about 1½ hours. Thirty years earlier the city of Vientiane had a population of 23,000 and if ever a villager from Ban Phon Sung had cause to go there, he walked and it took him 1½ days. This rapid transformation is having a considerable effect on the economic life of Ban Phon Sung.

One can try to reconstruct the available motives for the accumulation of wealth in Ban Phon Sung in 1943. These can be examined under the general headings 'insurance' and 'the quest for prestige'. By insurance I mean principally insurance against crop failure. This might take the form of a reserve stock of grain, or the accumulation of animals or silver bars to be exchanged for grain. Insurance against illness was hardly necessary since the cost of medical care (spirit and herbal practitioners) was minimal. Insurance against the costs of death or marriage was important, however, and here the idea of prestige also enters in. The family must be able to dispose of its dead in a decent manner, but the more lavish the display, the safer the journey of the deceased into the beyond, and the higher the prestige acquired by the living. Marriage also was an occasion for the acquisition of prestige, both in the amount paid in bride-wealth and in the festivities which the family could afford to put on.

The quest for prestige was most closely linked with the acquisition of religious merit, bun. The relationship between the Buddhist concept of bun and the Lao notion piap, in which prestige is a most important element, is discussed in the next chapter. The significant point in economic terms is that many ways of acquiring bun require the re-distribution of wealth. Supreme among these, particularly for a mother, is the ordination of one of her sons as a full Buddhist monk. This ceremony, even in its simplest form, is costly, but its performance gives considerable religious merit to the sponsor. Other methods of acquiring bun are by contributing to the construction or maintenance of a vat, giving alms to the monks, and so on. In very general terms it is understood that, all other things being equal, the greater the expenditure, the greater the bun acquired. On the other hand the surest way for acquiring merit for a man is to become a monk himself, a life where

he withdraws entirely from participation in the village economy and the search for wealth (except as a consumer). In terms of the acquisition of prestige, however, the monk is not really in competition with the layman - he operates on a different plane. The prestige is acquired by his family, provided that they continue to support him materially in his monkhood, and is available to him if he returns to secular life.

For what other purposes did the Ban Phon Sung villager wish to acquire possessions in 1943? The answer is not many. He could build himself a fine house if he was willing to invest in the labour of other villagers that he and his family would have to repay later, on request. Otherwise the number of items he would want to buy from outside the village was extremely limited.

It might be supposed, however, that even without the material incentives of a modern economy, villagers would be competing vigorously to acquire as much wealth as possible, so that they could obtain more prestige than their neighbours. Two factors mitigated against this. The first was the limit of physical possibilities, and the second was the concept of 'appropriateness', khū'.

It should be remembered that in rural Laos in 1943 there were no quick-profit activities open with the possible exception of trading in opium, a new and risky business involving much travelling. Within the traditional village pursuits profits were small even at the ideal moment of the domestic cycle when most members of the household were productive. In addition, economic activities were also governed by a feeling for what was khū', 'appropriate'. It was not done, it was not khū', to work on the Buddhist sabbath and it was not khū' to hoard one's profits. Villagers have a fine feeling for the line between the man who is salāt

('clever') and makes adequate provision for all eventualities, and the man who is khī thī ('mean'), by which is meant a hoarder of wealth, a man who does not redistribute his wealth appropriately for the benefit of the rest of the community. Naturally, when a man gets a reputation for being khī thī, then he loses the prestige which he is hoping to acquire by working hard and acquiring a fortune. Furthermore it can easily be thought khī thī to refuse help to a relative or friend if you have the means available and he does not. One way or another then, the accumulated wealth of the most enterprising and hard-working villagers in 1943 tended to get regularly redistributed among the rest of the community.

It is these attitudes, I think, and not 'laziness', which have prevented many modern development schemes from catching on in Lao villages. A Lao villager does not feel that he is in competition with his neighbours, even if he does wish to acquire prestige by the appropriate use of his wealth in making bun or entertaining his friends. Kaufman[1] wrote of the people who gave up growing vegetables for the marke since they felt forced to give them away to neighbours and relatives who came and asked for them. I have often heard Lao villagers use this reasoning to explain why some apparently profitable initiative would in fact be uneconomic. The concepts of kinship and friendship allow considerable rights of use in the private property of others. The man who refused to lend his ox-cart to his cousin was as khī thī as the one who transferred his surplus rice harvest instantly into silver bars.

In the 30 years between 1943 and 1973 the rapid rapprochement with a growing urban economy, the introduction of national education, the

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1. Kaufman (1961) p. 6.

meetings with Chinese, French or Thai businessmen were sources for the propagation of new attitudes. But perhaps the most significant developments were the increasing range of possessions which a rural family might reasonably hope to have, and the emergence of new ways of obtaining prestige.

Where medical treatment had cost practically nothing, it could, if one were unlucky, now cost a fortune to pay for the best treatment of a serious illness. Where education had been available only in the local vat, a son might now wish to continue studying for years. Where a house had been made entirely of local materials, it now needed a galvanised iron roof and well-cut planks for its floor. Radios, bicycles, motorcycles, hurricane lamps, even tractors were now potential rewards for hard work and enterprise. Where before to have four buffaloes was a good insurance, but to have 15 was just a lot of work, now the 15 might be transformed into something 'essential', such as medical treatment, rather than being purely luxury.

Attitudes, of course, do not change overnight, and conflict inevitably developed about what was khū'. Some villagers, however, became less concerned about getting a reputation for being khī thī and arousing jealousies in less enterprising people, for by 1973 opportunities for acquiring prestige had widened into totally new fields. In the 1950s and 1960s a national civil service was being formed, a modern army recruited. For the first time perhaps a villager of Ban Phon Sung might hope to make his mark outside the village. As the new national economic and political services began to have an impact, however small, on Ban Phon Sung, villagers could hope to acquire prestige by having a son who was successful in a national context.

These fundamental changes in the organisation of rural economic

relations naturally engendered disharmony in the village community. Many older people regretted the passing of generous unconcern for amassing wealth. I have told of the old woman who explained how one could no longer ask a fish from one's cousin, because the cousin intended to sell it in the market. Some people still did ask their cousin for fish, though, and were as quietly furious when refused, as the cousin was annoyed if he felt forced to give in. There was inevitably resentment at the increasing economic power of certain families.

Naturally enough, in a Lao context which retained a great respect for the need to maintain appearances of harmony, those strains were kept as far as possible below the surface. They existed, though, and were brought about primarily by the rapid widening of Ban Phon Sung's economic horizons and its integration into a national market economy. The new economic opportunities brought with them social and political influences which challenged some of the fundamental preconceptions of Lao social life. People reacted in different ways to these new influences and most tried to justify their decisions in terms of 'traditional Lao society'. In some cases this led to logical contradictions since 'traditional Lao society' had not had to confront the particular problems posed by the new economy.

Opportunities for wealth differentiation clearly loosened the traditional economic interdependence of the community, allowing some families to establish economic relations outside the village. Village society was being transformed, but the problems and conflicts which this engendered were as nothing compared to those encountered by villagers who emigrated to Vientiane. My discussion of the urban economy describes the economic patterns to which they had to adapt. First, however, I should like to conclude this description of the rural economy with some family case-studies from Ban Phon Sung.

7. Economic case-studies in Ban Phon Sung

While inheritance plays an important part in the potential of individual rural dwellers to achieve wealth, there is no sign in the village of the development of economically exclusive groups maintained by intermarriage. If one compares the economic standing of those groups of siblings now set up in separate households, the results are inconclusive. There are those cases where wealth scores are similar, which seem to imply a strong connection between family and wealth, but then there are other cases which seem to argue the reverse: siblings of whom one is wealthy, the other poor.

On the whole, though birth and inheritance play an obvious part, there are many other factors at work in the determination of relative wealth. To illustrate some of them, it will be interesting to look at the households of four siblings aged from 74 down to 57, whose families contain some of the more influential people in the village.

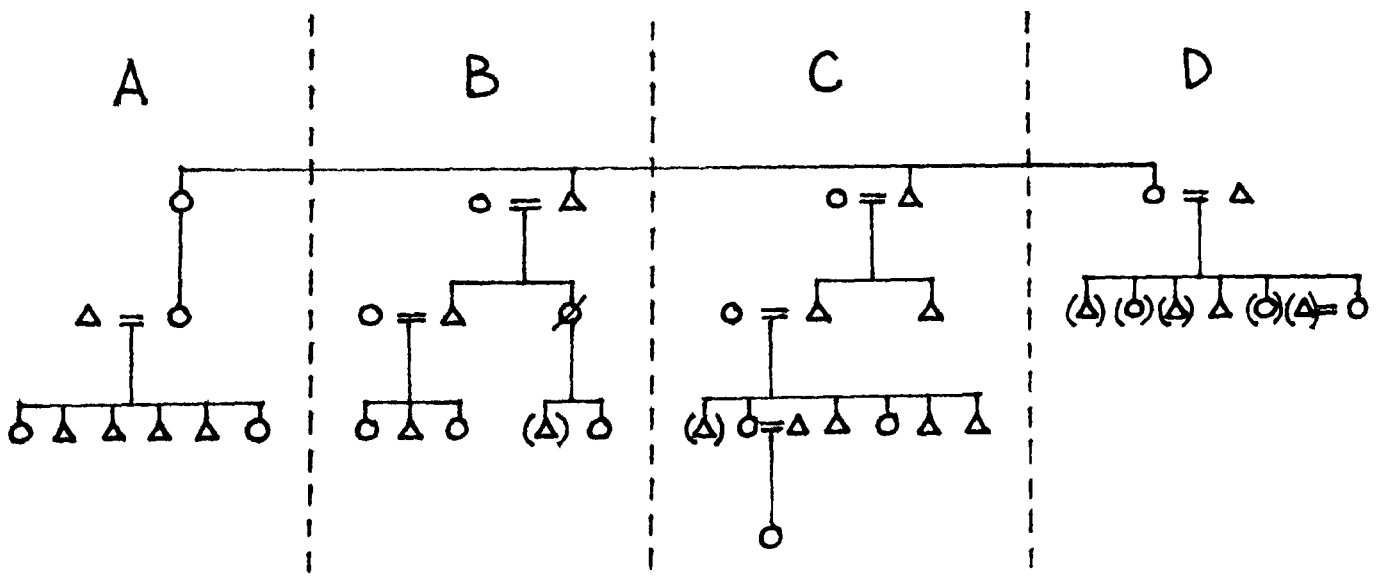


Fig. 3 Genealogical relationships of four households in Ban Phon Sung

Table 11 Possessions of four Ban Phon Sung households

	A	B	C	D
Wealth points per head	258	190	313	507
Wealth points per household	1,806	1,141	4,064	2,534
Buffaloes	6	4	6	10
Cows	5	2	20	
Pigs	10	3	1	1
Ducks			2	5
Chickens	16	6	6	20
Car			1	
Motorcycle				
Bicycle			1	1
Radio			1	
Baskets seed	9	9	6	24

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Household A

Mae Tu (Grandmother) Somhak (74) lives with the second youngest of her four daughters in this household headed by Mr Kham (39). Mr Kham and his wife have six children, aged 1 to 13 years, of whom the four eldest are in primary school, making a ratio of producers to dependents of only 2 : 7. Mr Kham and his wife both come from long-established Ban Phon Sung families and they have about three hectares of good land. This is sufficient to allow Mr Kham to employ a labourer throughout the agricultural season, owing to the lack of manpower in his household. He has six buffaloes, five cows and ten pigs. He does not have a bicycle or a radio and his house, though large, is sparsely furnished.

In 1973 the household harvested 3,000 kgs of paddy and 600 kgs of swidden, of which total 600 kgs went to the labourer for his 50 days work, 12 kgs a day. That left the family with 1,800 kgs of milled rice, which is enough to feed 10 adults for a year. Since the household's consumption is the equivalent of about seven adults, they had a useful surplus.

Mae Tu Somhak's youngest daughter, with whom she might be expected to live, was sent to Vientiane to stay with relatives while acquiring an education and came back with a husband from Thailand. It was felt more appropriate that the house go to the daughter who had stayed on and looked after grandmother, rather than simply the youngest. The youngest daughter's choice of husband may also have played a part.

During 1973 Mr Kham's eldest child had a bad attack of malaria. He took her to Vientiane, where they stayed at the house of the medical assistant referred to above. The disease was persistent and they went

to Vientiane six times altogether, each time paying around 5,000 kip for medicine. With travel costs added, the total cost was probably over half the price of a fully grown cow.

Household B

Mae Tu Somhak's brother, Phō Tu (Grandfather) Deng is 71 and lives with his wife and their only surviving son (35), his wife, their three children aged 1, 4 and 11 years, and a daughter's daughter (21), whose parents are both already dead. Thit (ex-monk) Phone, the 35 year old son, has spent a total of nine years in the vat first as a novice, then as a monk.

Although this household has a better ratio of producers to dependents (3 : 5) than Mae Tu Somhak's, and although the eldest grandson has set up in business in the district capital, household B is less well off than household A. They have fewer buffaloes (4), cows (2) and pigs (3) and although their rice-fields are the same size, in 1973 they harvested only 1,800 kgs of paddy and 720 kgs of swidden rice. Having more workers in the household, they did not need to hire any labourers and were able to call on the help of relatives at harvest and transplanting time in exchange for their own participation in relatives' fields. Their rice production of about 1,500 kgs of milled rice is enough for the annual food needs of $8\frac{1}{2}$ adults, so there should be a small surplus.

One indication of relative wealth is whether a household mills its rice by hand (with pestle and mortar) or by machine. One local farmer has a mechanical rice-mill, and 24% of households use it for all their milling, while 53% use it for a part and do the rest by hand. The owner's charge for this service is that he keeps the rice bran (for animal fodder) or takes an equivalent cash payment. Whereas Mae Tu Somhak's household mills all their rice mechanically (the mill is owned by her son-in-law's sister and her husband, so it would certainly be done cheap), Phō Tu Deng's mills some by hand (the orphaned granddaughter of 21 does it with some help from the granddaughter of 11), and they keep the bran for pig-feed.

Phō Tu Deng's household, like his sister's, boasts no motorcycle, bicycle or radio, and in fact rates just below the village average in terms of wealth, whereas his sister stands comfortably above it. The relative poverty of a family which certainly benefited from a reasonable inheritance can be ascribed to the early deaths of a daughter and her husband and the need to bring up their children. In addition Thit Phone's years in the vat between ages 13 and 22 will also have put a strain on the family's finances, both in terms of capital outlay for the ceremonies involved and loss of revenue from his work in the fields.

Household C

The third of the four siblings, Phō Tu Nouan, aged 69, is the doyen of one of the three richest households in the village - also one of the most numerous.

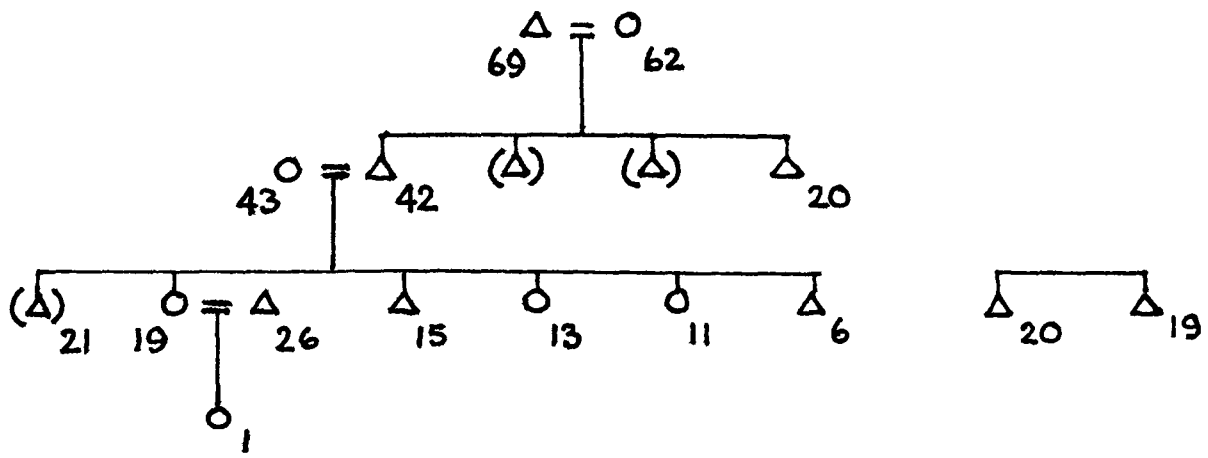


Fig. 4 Ban Phon Sung: Genealogical relationships

The effective head of the household is now Mr Phoun, his eldest son. Phǭ Tu Nouan and his wife themselves prefer to spend as much time as they can in their little hut away from the village near the grazing grounds of their cattle.

The economic activity of this household is centred around the large taxi-bus which they operate down to Vientiane every morning except Sundays, leaving at 5 o'clock in the morning to go up the road for passengers and produce for the market, and returning to the village about two in the afternoon. The bus is driven by Mr Phoun's youngest brother (20), and his middle son (15) and two cousins (20 and 19) who live with them, make up the rest of the crew. Mr Phoun travels regularly to Vientiane with the bus on business, and his commercial expertise is such that he has become a sort of economic adviser to the village committee. He has no formal education, but his youngest brother finished primary school and his own eldest son has qualified as a teacher. (He teaches in a neighbouring province.) His eldest daughter's husband is also a teacher, and teaches at the village's own school.

Despite these extensive non-agricultural activities, the household has not given up growing rice. Their fields are not so extensive as Mae Tu Somhak's or Phǭ Tu Deng's, but they are well situated. In 1973 they employed 13 hired labourers for a total of four days to help with transplanting and also harvesting. Their total production for the year was 2,400 kgs of paddy. Of this the equivalent of 600 kgs was paid to the labourers. The remaining 1,800 kgs of paddy (1,080 kgs of milled rice) would be enough to feed about six people for a year, so the household is obliged to buy about half the rice it consumes.

The household has six buffaloes, 20 cows, one pig and, in addition to the bus, a bicycle and a radio. All their rice is milled mechanically

Household D

The youngest of the four siblings, Mae Tu Souk (57), is married to the former chief of the sub-district (66), and their house has remained a centre for village relations with the outside world. They had six children, of which the youngest son (24) and youngest daughter (18) remained at home. The household had recently been augmented by an

adopted son (5) and the youngest daughter's husband. Although their two eldest children received no formal education, both have left the village and done well outside, the boy (39) as a merchant, the girl (34) marrying a doctor. It is the second son (28), however, who carries the hopes of the family. His education was greatly assisted by a town family who were indebted to his father, and who offered to put him up in Vientiane while he pursued his studies. Eventually he was able to complete a degree course at a foreign university. While I was there, his return was eagerly awaited and his prospects for a glittering future in the national bureaucracy were often hinted at by visitors to the house. The next son, having spent time as a soldier, returned to farming, and in the last months of his bachelorhood undertook some buying and selling of buffaloes, trekking to remote villages on the edges of the Vientiane Plain and driving the animals back for sale in the area close to the town. The next sister (20) had just completed her teacher's diploma and had recently married and settled in Vientiane, while the youngest daughter, true to custom, remained in the village. She took only five years of primary school, although she could have continued, before settling down to look after her parents. While I was in the village, she married a teacher, who was transferred after a few months to a school in a neighbouring village to which he went every morning on his motorcycle. The elderly couple, seeing their own children growing up and gradually leaving the village, had recently adopted the son of a poor relative of their eldest son's wife, who had been entrusted to them by his parents. He provided amusement and occupation for the couple until their youngest daughter started her family.

The household was among the most comfortably situated in the village Ten buffaloes, a pig and a bicycle might not seem much, but they had extensive and very well situated rice fields, having inherited from both sides. In 1973, having virtually no manpower available (the 24 year old son had not yet returned) they had let out their fields to other farmers who paid a share of the crop. Their share had come to 2,400 kgs of paddy (1,440 kgs of milled rice), enough to feed eight people for a year, leaving enough for the two daughters in Vientiane to take a very welcome contribution to their housekeeping costs in the worsening urban economic climate.

C. The Urban Economy

1. Ban Savang and the urban economy

Ban Savang was until a few years ago an area of agricultural land farmed by half a dozen families who lived in the then much smaller town of Vientiane. It has gradually been taken over as a residential suburb, although, as can be seen from map no. 5, some areas are still farmed as rice fields, and others are retained as fruit orchards or simply left as waste land.

All buildings indicated on the map are residential accommodation of one sort or another with the following exceptions:

(a) A Chinese owned distillery
(b) A commercial flower nursery
(c) Warehouses used by USAID
(d) Warehouses used by a commercial company
(e) The Buddhist temple
(f) The school
(g) The Crematorium

The standards of the residential accommodation range from luxury villas inhabited by foreigners or senior Lao officials and merchants to shacks in which a whole family lives in a single room with no amenities whatever. Naturally enough the diversity of occupations pursued by the residents and the range of their wealth or poverty are as varied as their accommodation. How representative of Vientiane as a whole are the residents of Ban Savang, and how representative of Ban Savang are the 68 households covered by my sample?

To take the second question first, I surmised in the previous chapter that my sample might be somewhat weighted in favour of the middle echelons of the economic scale. There are a few wealthy families in Ban Savang who live in isolation from the rest of the community and they are not represented. Equally the poorest families tended to be so transient, and had so little contact with the village authorities, that they may also be underrepresented. They are not, however, totally absent, as we shall see.

More importantly though, how representative is Ban Savang of Vientiane as a whole? The rapid expansion of Vientiane, described above, took place basically in two ways. First, villages which had been rural agricultural villages were gradually swallowed up and many families abandoned their agricultural livelihood to take up jobs in the new urban economy. Secondly, the agricultural land which those families

had themselves sold off to builders was itself progressively built up, so that two types of suburban community developed, those where there was a core of long-term resident families who had simply changed their occupations to fit the new circumstances, and those where no such core existed. Of this second type, some were nonetheless settled by relatively homogenous groups, particularly in the case of ethnic minorities migrating into the town. In Ban Savang there is a small Tai Dam community. There were also two large quarters in Vientiane where the majority of the residents were Vietnamese. In addition to the commercial centre of the town (inhabited principally by Chinese) and the main administrative quarters, there were also a number of areas which had been developed particularly with temporary foreign residents in mind. Here, concrete villas stood behind high walls and inhabited a world of their own, but they had not completely erased the previous populations, and an occasional wooden Lao house surrounded by a light fence would incongruously interrupt the lines of the brick walls. Conversely the poorer areas would often reveal the occasional luxurious villa taking up as much space as the next thirty habitations.

Finally there were two areas in Vientiane of genuine urban slums, 'bidonvilles', one behind the morning market, the other beside the evening market, both small by international standards, where shacks were rented out to transients, migrant labourers, prostitutes, petty traders and some penniless refugees from the war. The following, therefore, is a list of the types of use to which space in the town was put:

Commercial centre (Chinese)
Administrative areas
Foreign residents' areas
Asian minority quarters (Vietnamese, Indian, Tai Dam)
Lao traditional villages
Lao migrant villages
Markets
Slums

Given the wide range of communities which make up the city of Vientiane, it would obviously be impossible to find one which was 'typical'. It may be more useful to ask how typical Ban Savang is of the various Lao migrant villages, and here again the answer would seem to be that it attracts neither the richest nor the poorest. The richest may be put off by the relative lack of economic infrastructure (dusty road, etc.), while the way in which land has been sold off by the original owners to individual migrants for house-building, implying the availability of a certain initial capital, has disqualified the poorest immigrants. There are, as already pointed out, a few one-room shacks available for minimal rent, but even these require some funds. Ban Savang did not house the truly destitute, who ended up predominantly in one of the two genuine slum areas near the markets. One of these areas, Ban Fay, was the subject of a short report[1] which describes the conditions endured by a few families squatting on the disused French cemetery in huts made of scavenged materials. Some of these exceptionally poor people appear to have been refugees from the war who were not resettled with the larger groups, and ended up living from day to day off the meagre proceeds of porterage and petty trading around the market.

With these reservations, therefore, Ban Savang looks to be quite typical of the new villages which sprang up around the commercial and administrative centre of Vientiane and catered particularly for Lao migrants from the provinces and North-East Thailand, as well as for young couples whose parents had migrated to Vientiane a generation before, but who could no longer afford to live in the central part of the city, in which they were born.

The impression that Ban Savang is predominantly a 'middle-class'

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1. Anon (1973).

suburb is reinforced by looking at the figures on occupation.

2. The occupations of Ban Savang residents

The most recent census data for Vientiane concerning employment comes from the Rapport d'un recensement démographique - Ville de Vientiane - 1966-67.[1] While emphasising once more the reservations to be made about Lao statistics, and pointing out that this survey took place seven years before my own research, a few general indications may be gained from comparing the data given in the Rapport with that revealed by my own small sample.

The report divides the population of the city into (a) Under 10s, (b) 'Active' over 10s, (c) 'Inactive' over 10s (by which was meant students (sic), housewives (sic), retired and unemployed). The categories, numbers and percentages of the 1967 report and my own corresponding figures for Ban Savang in 1974 are given in Tables 12 to 15.

Table 12 Vientiane and Ban Savang - Distribution of population into 'active' and 'inactive'

	Vientiane 1967		Ban Savang 1974	
	Numbers	%	Numbers	%
Under 10s	46,715	35.3	167	32.9
'Active' employed	43,120	32.6	141	27.8
'Inactive'	42,418	32.1	200	39.3
Total Population	132,253	100	508	100

1. Inthavong (1970). Results of the 1973 census, apart from bare population figures, have still not been published.

Table 13 Vientiane and Ban Savang - Distribution of types of employment of 'active' population

		Vientiane 1967		Ban Savang 1974	
		Numbers	%	Numbers	%
0	Liberal professions	1,337	3.1	8	5.7
1	Directors and senior bureaucrats	4,838	11.2	41	29.1
2	Office workers and civil servants				
3	Commerce and sales	5,498	12.8	31	22.0
4	Agriculture	2,087	4.8	7	5.0
5	Workers, labourers	4,126	9.6	16	11.4
6	Service employees	13,212	30.6	18	12.8
7	Armed forces	6,352	14.7	12	8.5
8	Police	1,298	3.0	8	5.7
9	Others	4,372	10.1	-	-
	Totals	43,120	100	141	100

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Table 14 Vientiane and Ban Savang - Numbers of students, housewives, retired and unemployed

	Vientiane 1967		Ban Savang 1974	
	Numbers	%	Numbers	%
Students	18,316	43.2	126	63
Housewives	21,655	51.1	58	29
Others	2,447	5.7	16	8
Totals	42,418	100	200	100

Table 15 Vientiane and Ban Savang - Numbers of employed and students by sex

	Active employed	Male Numbers	%	Female Numbers	%
Vientiane 1967	43,120	33,079	76.7	10,041	23.3
Ban Savang 1974	141	93	66	48	34

	Students	Male Numbers	%	Female Numbers	%
Vientiane 1967	18,316	10,577	57.7	7,739	42.3
Ban Savang 1974	126	69	54.8	57	45.2

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Without trying to read anything very startling into these figures, it does seem possible to hazard some general observations.

The first thing to note would seem to be that there are a higher proportion of 'inactive' people in Ban Savang in 1974. This is more than accounted for by the very high proportion of students in Ban Savang, 37% of the entire population sample over 10 years of age, as compared with 21.4% for Vientiane in 1967. These figures appear to represent both a general increase in the length of time which young people in Vientiane are spending in schools and colleges, and also a bias in Ban Savang in favour of families who are able to afford schooling for their children over a relatively long period.

Secondly, the occupations in which the Ban Savang sample has a markedly higher percentage than the 1967 report are Liberal professions, Bureaucrats, Commerce and Police, while there is a lower proportion of Service employees, and Armed Forces, with Agriculture and Workers roughly the same. In other words my Ban Savang sample is in general employed in occupations enjoying higher than average social status.

Thirdly, whereas 'housewives' make up 25.3% of the 1967 population over 10 years old, the figure is down to 17% in my sample. This would seem to be due in part to large household size in Ban Savang, but it may also indicate a reaction to worsening economic conditions. In a number of households in Ban Savang we shall see that salaries which were adequate in 1967 were no longer so in 1974, and a large number of Ban Savang wives started selling in the market in a small way. It will become apparent how marginal, but how widespread, this kind of 'commerce' is.

Furthermore, the Ban Savang sample indicates a greater involvement of women both in employment and as students. Table 15 shows that 34% of the Ban Savang workforce are women compared with only 23.3% for Vientiane 1967. Some of this difference can certainly be accounted for by the housewives who have become traders, but the trend is also there in the proportion of female students, 45.2% in Ban Savang as against 42.3% in Vientiane 1967. There has certainly been a gradual liberalisation of attitudes among the Lao population of Vientiane with regard to the usefulness of education for women and as to the propriety of women going out to work, and this has had its effect on urban economic relations. General questions of the role of women in urban society are treated in Chapter Seven.

In conclusion, then, the initial study of the statistics on employment would seem to confirm that whereas most occupational groups are represented in Ban Savang, the middle-upper income groups are somewhat overrepresented, so that a particularly high proportion of young people are still in education who might otherwise be in employment.

3. Length of urban residence

A further important indication of whether Ban Savang contains a

reasonable cross-section of urban migrants can be obtained by looking at comparative lengths of residence in the city.

The population figures that we have for Vientiane as a whole are: 1943 - 23,000. 1959 - 68,000. 1966 - 132,000. 1974 - 175,000.

Extrapolating from these, we can obtain approximate figures for the numbers of the 1974 population who had migrated (a) within the last 10 years, (b) from 10-20 years before, and (c) over 20 years before.

Table 16 Vientiane - Numbers of migrants over previous 20 years, allowing for natural increase

	1954		1964		1974
Population	40,000		50,000		60,000
		(new migrants)	60,000		75,000
		Total	110,000	(migrants)	40,000
				Total	175,000

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In Ban Savang the distribution is remarkably even between migrants in the three categories, and compares with the figures for Vientiane as follows:

Table 17 Vientiane and Ban Savang - Length of urban residence

	Over 20 years		10-20 years		Under 10 years	
	Numbers	%	Numbers	%	Numbers	%
Vientiane	60,000	34	75,000	43	40,000	23
Ban Savang	168	33	167	33	174	34

****

What might appear a significant difference between those who migrated over or under 10 years previously is really of little importance,

especially since the Tai Dam migrants had been in the city just less than 10 years, and might easily have pushed up Ban Savang's figures in the middle column. On the whole I think we can say that Ban Savang is quite representative of the city of Vientiane in the amount of time its inhabitants have spent in the urban setting. Where, of course, the interest of such figures should lie is in allowing an assessment of the way in which migrants adapt to urban institutions and life-styles over time. Unfortunately my sample is really too small to permit any reliable conclusions on a statistical basis. Nevertheless, feeling that opinions about the role of women might be an area particularly susceptible to gradual adaptation during residence in town, I looked at the occupational categories of women in my sample between ages 15-50, and divided them according to the length of urban residence. The results were as follows:

Table 18 Ban Savang - Employment of women according to length of urban residence

	Over 20 years in Vientiane		10-20 years in Vientiane		Under 10 years in Vientiane	
	Numbers	%	Numbers	%	Numbers	%
Housewives	14	40	17	52	24	68
Students	6	17	5	15	2	6
Employed	15	43	11	33	9	26
	35	100	33	100	35	100

****

Although the numbers involved are so insignificant, it is tempting to see a gradual liberalisation of attitudes about allowing women to work and study outside the home, as families become adapted to the urban environment and urban mores.

4. Wealth in Ban Savang

(a) Introduction to the survey

Unfortunately it proved even more difficult to obtain adequate economic data in Ban Savang than it had been in Ban Phon Sung. Even with a limited questionnaire I obtained satisfactory replies from only 52 of the 68 sample households. Secondly, the criteria of which the wealth assessment was made were necessarily incomplete. As in Ban Phon Sung I did not try to value land, houses or furniture, although the variations in housing standards were far greater than in the countryside. Income was included, but most people would not give any figure other than their monthly salary or wage, and, in the case of merchants, an estimate of their monthly income. Undeclared income, therefore, such as rents from houses or rice-fields, which for some families was extremely important, is not included.

Again the limitations of using a uniform points system should be noted. I decided to use the same points system as in Ban Phon Sung, substituting monthly salary for rice-fields, except in the case of farmers. The points for salaries were obtained my multiplying the monthly salary by 12 (months in a year) and dividing by 1,000 (1,000 kip = 1 point). I also added points for television sets, refrigerators and electric fans, which were not to be found in Ban Phon Sung. The criteria used, and their values, were:

Buffalo	150	Car	1,200
Cow	80	Motorcycle	450
Pig	15	Bicycle	100
Duck	3	Radio	15
Chicken	2	Television	250
Rice seed per basket	36	Fan	100
		Refrigerator	150
		Salary	x12 ÷ 1,000

(b) General results

The results were tabulated in five ranked groups, each representing approximately 20% of the sample, according to their order by wealth per household, and by wealth per head.

Table 19 Ban Savang - Distribution of wealth per household and per head

	Wealth per household		Wealth per head		
	% of village wealth	Average household size	% of village wealth	Average household	Average score
1-10	40.8%	7.5 pers.	33.9%	3.9 pers.	679
11-20	22.7	5.9	23.4	5.3	346
21-30	15.8	7.8	15.6	5.7	215
31-41	12.9	5.4	16.0	7.7	148
42-52	7.8	5.2	11.0	7.6	102

Points scores	per household	per head
Overall average	1503	246
Top score	5935	1484
Lowest score	297	53

****

It can be seen that the wealth per head table is the more interesting. In fact a few very large households (17-18 persons) appear quite high on the wealth per household list, even though they are very poor, and this upsets the figures. In the wealth per head table, it can be seen that the top 10 households own 33.9% of the village wealth even though they represent only 12% of the total population. The bottom 11 households own 11% of the village wealth, but make up 26% of the population If we take the average scores per head, the top ten (679) have 6.6 times as much as the bottom 11, and the top two families, averaging 1,131, have 14.3 times as much as the bottom 5 (average 79).

In fact, of course, the gap is even larger than these figures suggest

The top families live in luxurious houses, own land, have other sources of income. The bottom families rent very poor accommodation, own no land and can expect to make extra money only from petty trading of marginal profitability.

An idea of the number of households which possessed particular goods or amenities can be gained from the following table.

Table 20 Ban Savang - Number of households having specific goods and amenities

	No. (out of 52)	%		No. (out of 52)	%
Cars	10	19.2	Buffaloes or cows	3	5.8
Motorcycles	25	48.1	Pigs	8	15.4
Bicycles	28	53.8	Ducks or chickens	30	57.7
Radios	47	90.4	Rice fields	8	15.4
Televisions	6	11.5	Electricity	39	75.0
Fans	18	34.6	Piped water	5	9.6
Refrigerators	8	15.4	Own own house	43	82.7

****

It will be noted that nearly every household has a radio, 4 out of 5 own their own home, 3 out of 4 have electricity and something over half have a bicycle and raise a few chickens or ducks. Fewer families have a piped water supply than own a television set!

5. Comparison of economic data from Ban Phon Sung and Ban Savang

The economic data collected in Ban Phon Sung and Ban Savang are not of course strictly comparable. Measuring buffaloes against refrigerators and fans is a relatively meaningless exercise. Comparison of the data does, however, allow us to say some things about the distribution of wealth in rural and urban areas.

Table 21 is a summary of the average wealth points scores per head in Ban Phon Sung and Ban Savang, dividing each village into five groups of households from richest to poorest. The average numbers in the house-

Table 21 Ban Phon Sung and Ban Savang - Comparative wealth points scores

	Ban Phon Sung			Ban Savang		
	Average scores	Average nos. per household	Age of household head	Average scores	Average nos. per household	Age of household head
1.	504	6.1	53.5	679	3.9	47.2
2.	338	6.1	49.6	346	5.3	37.9
3.	247	5.4	48.8	215	5.7	38.4
4.	157	6.0	46.2	148	7.7	42.8
5.	65	4.3	41.8	102	7.6	43.0

holds (excluding children under 5), and the average age of the household heads, are also given.

The first noticeable point is that the distribution of wealth appears to be quite similar. In both cases the top group has roughly seven times the bottom, and the intervals are regular. The scores are even close. The implication that wealth distribution is similar in Ban Phon Sung and Ban Savang would be quite false however. First of all it will be recalled that a number of the poorest households in Ban Phon Sung were actually dependent on parental households. Secondly, the features which were not assessed, such as housing, are obviously far more divisive in Ban Savang than in Ban Phon Sung, and, if included, would greatly increase the range of difference in the Ban Savang figures.

Thirdly, it has already been pointed out that the average age of the household heads in Ban Phon Sung rises steadily as one moves up the economic ladder, with the clear implication that a rural household can be expected to improve its economic standing steadily from the moment that the household is first formed. In Ban Savang, however, there is no obvious correlation between the age of the household head and relative wealth. Indeed if it were not for the example of the top group, one might be tempted to suppose that people got poorer as they grew older.

Fourthly, whereas in Ban Phon Sung household size appears only to be significant in the bottom group (the parents are young), it is clearly an economic advantage in the town to have a small family. The two poorest groups have households almost twice as large as the richest.

One feature which does not appear in these figures is the exceptional wealth of two particular urban households. With an average of 1,131 points per head, 5 persons per household, they are in a 'class' of their own. The household heads are aged 62 and 63, and they are

part of a small elite group in Vientiane which has been present since the start of the economic expansion and has benefited from the soaring price of land, the availability of education and the opportunities for economic enterprise.

It seemed worth trying to discover whether there was any correlation between length of urban residence and comparative wealth, and the following table emerges:

Table 22 Ban Savang - Wealth per head according to length of urban residence

	Over 20 years	10-20 years	Under 10 years
Number of households	21	14	17
Average wealth points	296	212	216
Average household size	5.9	6.8	5.9

****

Although the most recent migrants seem to be doing just as well as those who arrived ten years earlier, those who have been in Vientiane for over 20 years do seem to have a distinct advantage. The variation is not as wide as one might have supposed, however, and there are long-term urban residents in the poorest groups, just as there are recent arrivals doing very well. The difficulty of course is distinguishing, in such statistics, between those who have migrated from provincial capitals and have brought money and education with them, and those who migrate from poor rural villages or because of the pressures of war.

I have hesitated to speak of economic class divisions in Vientiane, though clearly a case could be made out for doing so. My hesitation is due to the potential conflict with social status group distinctions which I discuss in Chapter Seven.[1] For, while there is an urban elite -

1. Chapter Seven contains a discussion of the whole question of stratification, class and status.

of which the two wealthiest families in Ban Savang are clearly part - in which membership is achieved on both economic and social grounds, both being essential factors, there is clearly a problem lower down the social scale. There, some high status jobs are very badly paid (particularly government service), while lower status families may be in a much superior position economically. In assessing the economic advantages of rural-urban migration these questions must be taken into account.

Precise conclusions about comparative economic standards in Ban Phon Sung and Ban Savang are obviously difficult. One can certainly say, however, that wealth differentiation is greater in Ban Savang, that large households are a disadvantage in the city, whereas they appear not to be in the countryside, and that rural dwellers can expect to get wealthier as they grow older, while city-folk have no such guarantee. If forced to make a qualitative comparison, one might say that there is nobody in Ban Phon Sung as well-off as the two top households in Ban Savang, but that very few people in Ban Savang could afford to invest in a large commercial bus, as one Ban Phon Sung family has been able to do. At the other end of the scale, although the poorest rural households appear to own nothing at all, there are a good number of families in Ban Savang who would jump at the opportunity of farming a good piece of paddy land, such as might be owned by one of the poorer Ban Phon Sung households.

6. The problem of low incomes

In looking at the rural economy I have already noted the influence of overseas aid on the development of the Lao national economy in this century. Here I should make clear that whereas the influence of overseas financial aid has been important in the Vientiane plain over the past 20

years, it has been the backbone, the sine qua non of the urban economy. The growth of Vientiane, the opportunities for employment, education and health services - every feature of life in Vientiane as it was in the early 1970s - had been financed by what the economist Myint has termed 'windfall' foreign exchange payments.[1] In other words the urban economy was based not on industry, nor on the exploitation of raw materials, nor on the profits from agriculture, nor even on foreign loans designed to promote one or other of the above developments, but on ex gratia payments made on the basis of a political commitment by the government in power.

It will be recalled that the introduction of these payments in the late 1950s and early 1960s was accompanied by a flood of subsidised imports, designed to soak up the salaries paid to the new servants of the government, both military and civilian. After an initial period of sporadic inflation and fluctuating exchange rates, the system remained fairly stable between 1966 and 1971 with the exchange rate at 500 kip to 1 US dollar. However, during this period the import subsidies were gradually withdrawn, the number of government employees increased, the intensity of the war displaced many thousands from their villages, and the apparent economic bonanza in Vientiane attracted large numbers of immigrants to seek their fortune there. Meanwhile the donor governments, principally the United States, but also the United Kingdom, France, Australia, and Japan, were beginning to expect the Lao government to meet more of its expenses from revenue which it had raised itself, and were seeking ways to reduce their annual commitment. The result was that the cake was gradually reduced in size, while the numbers requiring a piece multiplied. The government could not increase salaries to keep pace with inflation, and they could not raise more money from taxation without contributing further to inflation.

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1 Myint (1972)

They were unable to control the exploitation of timber, and the large profits which could have gone into the exchequer instead went abroad. Modest increases in government revenues could not keep pace with increased expenditures. Corruption was widespread in the administration, though it was increasingly a question of need at the lower levels. People argued that if the government did not pay them a living wage, they would have to pay themselves one.

In 1971 the kip was devalued for the first time for five years. Fairly soon afterwards a black market in US dollars developed and the economy was at last showing visible signs of its underlying fragility. In fact the value of personal salaries had been declining steadily. By 1974, when I interviewed the villagers of Ban Savang and asked the question "Is your salary (or other main source of income) sufficient to meet your living costs?", only 5 out of 52 answered in the affirmative. These five were two farmers, two merchants and one well qualified technician employed by the government, who also worked for private companies in his spare time. Nine hours of private work per month paid him the same as his government salary. Of the 33 heads of household who were salaried employees and who were ready to report both their present salary and the sum which they estimated would be adequate to meet their living costs, most gave a figure approximately $2\frac{1}{2}$ times the amount they were then receiving, the range being from $1\frac{1}{2}$ times to over 4 times with an average of 2.46 times.

However, when asked whether their salaries had been adequate five years previously, 16 out of the 33 mentioned above replied that they had been, while all reported that the situation had at least been less bad. It should be clear now why the yardstick of possessions was not in this case a very realistic one for estimating present wealth. Many people, unable to make ends meet, were already beginning to sell things

off. Many of the goods which people possessed, such as motorcycles, bicycles and refrigerators, were old and battered, but few saw any hope of being able to replace them. At such a moment the number of dependants to each person with a job becomes an important consideration, and for those at a bad point in the domestic cycle, who wished above all not to deprive their children of education, this time was one of great worries and difficulties. The urban economic boom which had allowed many to buy some land, build a house on it and gather a few possessions as signs of their economic advancement, had subsided, and households which boasted a television set or a small car often now found themselves subsisting on a quite inadequate diet. What solutions were available to them?

Apart from crime or corruption, prostitution or gambling, 'solutions' which were tried by increasing numbers of people during this period, and which are discussed in Chapter Seven, there were a number of possibilities, of which the most successful was moonlighting. As noted above, the only salaried official who found his income adequate was one who was able to double it each month by working just nine hours for private firms. Teachers took any private students they could find, doctors and nurses ran a variety of private clinics, and most were kept surprisingly busy considering the economic climate. Increasingly people without such specialist qualifications began to raise a few chickens or ducks around their homes, took on non-specialist jobs on the side (one civil servant in the village drove a taxi at night), or encouraged their wives to trade at the market. The markets became flooded with people who came to sell one or two chickens, or a few fruits gathered near their homes. Naturally with such competition, and a diminishing number of clients, the profit margins became ridiculously small. Many certainly went home at the end of the day having sold nothing or having sold at a

loss. What other options were open?

For some there was a possibility of seeking help from rural-based relatives. At least seven of the 52 households surveyed in Ban Savang received part of their rice from relatives in the country who produced it. Some were able to claim back assistance they had given to their rural cousins in years gone by.

Many people of course got into debt. If possible, one 'borrowed' from relatives, since the loan tended to be of indefinite duration and carried no interest. Otherwise the best way was to run up a bill at a shop and then forget to pay it. A young divorced woman enterprisingly opened a cafe in Ban Savang which sold beer and whisky as well as coffee. Its bright new interior soon attracted customers and the old coffee shop just up the road began to look more dishevelled and run down than ever. However, the competition only lasted four or five months, since the young woman soon became unable to replenish her stocks when the customers bought everything on credit and refused to pay. Eventually the old cafe up the road resumed its undisputed dominance of the negligible trade. For those who were more scrupulous than the customers at the cafe, the joke of how long into the month their pay cheque lasted began to wear thin. Increasingly, the whole amount had been unfailingly promised to meet commitments which would wait no longer. When it seemed impossible to buy any more food, then some valuable possession was sold, and for a few more months the salary could be used to meet minimal current expenses.

It may be wondered if there was not one simple radical solution to this problem. If, as it appears, the urban economy was clearly sinking, but the rural economy in some parts of the country looked relatively buoyant, why did people simply not leave the cities and

return to earn their living off the land which many had presumably left not very long before?

First of all it seems that seasonal immigrants to Vientiane who worked in the rice fields during the agricultural season, but came to Vientiane in the dry season, were indeed coming to the capital in smaller numbers, preferring to find odd jobs in the countryside, where they were reasonably sure at least of being adequately fed. This conclusion is suggested by the large proportion of low-cost accommodation for rent in Ban Savang which remained empty in 1974, and by the reports of greatly reduced earnings from workers like taxi-drivers and rickshaw men.

The reasons why those who had established themselves in Vientiane did not seek to cut their losses and move out were more complex. First, one-third had been in Vientiane for over 20 years and a quarter were actually born there. Many others could no longer return, because of the war, to the areas they had come from, and even if they could, some had sold off what land they had had before coming into town. Then, there was the children's education. Often I would suggest to friends that since the urban economy was based on overseas generosity, that generosity was bound to collapse one day, and with it would go the urban economy. Then the ever-increasing numbers of students would find it impossible to obtain one of the rapidly decreasing number of jobs. At that point one would be better off sitting on a piece of agricultural land. They would listen, agree with the arguments, shrug their shoulders and come up with one of these answers: either, "the Americans will never desert us", or, "when the Pathet Lao joins the government there will be no more corruption and then you'll see progress", or "but my son is going to university". The problem of course was as much one of 'face' as of logical response to economic

arguments or imperatives. As is true all over the world, the urban migrant who had cut his rural ties was desperately reluctant to return to his village other than for a quick visit in his Mercedes Benz.[1] Voluntary migration from country to town implies confidence in one's ability to succeed. If people are successful, they do not want to return. If they are not successful, they do not dare to. Indeed a number of those who talked about the possibility of starting a new life in the country, did so in such terms as "If I could find a nice piece of agricultural land in the Vientiane plain, I would go", or would mention some area quite different from their villages of origin, implying that they would not wish to return to their villages of origin as farmers, but would not mind setting up somewhere else.

As we shall see later, when discussing migration in detail (Chapter Eight), the situation was quite different when whole village communities migrated together, usually to escape the war, and were temporarily resettled together. Then they were usually willing, even eager, to return to their original villages. The individual migrant, however, frequently exaggerated the extent of his financial and political success in the big city when sending news to his rural relatives. Often the only way he would consider returning was if he obtained an administrative or military appointment in his home region.

Finally there was certainly a feeling in Vientiane during 1974 that momentous political events were taking place. Some thought that if they could just hold on, Shangri-la was around the corner. Others

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1. There is a clear distinction between deliberate temporary or seasonal migration, and the sort of migration which, as here, involved buying land, building a house, raising a family. For an example of temporary migration in the region, Textor's (1956) study of North-East Thai (ethnic Lao) rickshaw drivers in Bangkok is still relevant.

were more sanguine, but there was undoubtedly a fascination with impending events which made departure that much more difficult. How those dreams related to economic realities is the subject of the section after next.

7. Household economies in Ban Savang

In order to give a more rounded impression of the economic circumstances of the people of Ban Savang, I should like to take a closer look at a few individual households:-

Household A: Mr Khampha

Mr Khampha was born 37 years ago in a village about five miles outside Vientiane, where his relatives still have a farm. He went to school and was able to complete seven years of French language secondary schooling in Vientiane, making him in 1957 one of the few Lao with a full secondary education. Upon graduation he married a girl from Vientiane who had been in the same class as himself, and was therefore an even rarer person, a well-qualified Lao woman. At the start of their married life they had lived in central Vientiane, but as their children were born, they began to look for a place with more room. They bought a good-sized plot of land in Ban Savang and in 1967 the new house was ready for occupancy. By that stage they had seven children, and although the new house gave them room to raise a few chickens, Mr Khampha's salary was beginning to prove inadequate, and his wife started to take contraceptive pills. They made her sick, however, and she stopped taking them, so now they have 10 children.

In 1974 these children were aged between 17 and 2, a range which in the countryside would be perhaps five years short of the best moment in the domestic cycle when nearly all the children would be able to contribute in the fields. In 1974, however, Mr Khampha's seven elder children were all in school, and the atmosphere in the house was one of quiet desperation. I had seen Mr Khampha from time to time in the corridors of his ministry, where he looked slightly aloof, befitting his responsible position, and was invariably well groomed. In his home he explained how the few sticks of furniture were what was left of some fine furnishings purchased in the early years of their marriage. He had sold his car and bicycled to work. An antique refrigerator, now worth very little, was another sign of former glory. Fortunately, relatives in his home village supplied him with rice every year from fields in which he retained an interest. This usually provided about one third of the household's annual needs. Without it he could not imagine what he would do. Recently also his wife's younger brother had been moved to Vientiane from a post in the provinces and was living with them. He would help by contributing to the food kitty.

Mr Khampha had no thoughts of moving or returning to the countryside. He was after all a well qualified and experienced civil servant. Meanwhile, his wife, aged 35, looked haggard and totally worn out. She looked

after the three youngest children who were not yet at school and kept an eye on the dozen ducks and ten scrawny chickens which flopped about in the muddy yard around their house. She hoped she would not have any more children. Mr Khampha looked forward to the day when the eldest son would finish his education and begin to earn a good salary.

(Mr Khampha's household wealth score was 1,149, but their score per head was 115, which puts them among the bottom 20% in the village. He is a good example of a man with a high status job living in conditions of poverty.)

Household B: Mr Phongsavath

Mr Phongsavath was 54 years old and had been born in one of the southern provinces of Laos where he had farmed and practised his carpentry skills. Some 10 years before, the situation in his home district becoming difficult, he had begun to move north with his wife and eight of his ten children, two daughters remaining with childless relatives by whom they had been adopted at birth. In 1966, after spending a few months in various places, he had arrived in Vientiane, where he had rented some farming land, which he worked as a share-cropping tenant, while doing carpentry jobs in the dry season.

In 1974 he was living with his wife, eight children, two sons-in-law and five grandchildren, total 17. There were four other male wage earners besides himself. Two sons, neither of whom had ever been to school, worked as casual labourers. One son-in-law was a soldier, the other worked the fields with Mr Phongsavath. They had three buffaloes, which were essential for his work, one pig, three ducks and forty odd chickens, and he considered the household to be in grinding poverty.

The reason was not far to seek. Mr Phongsavath's wife had been a bed-ridden invalid for five years. It sounded as though she had TB. In the previous five years he reckoned to have spent over one million kip on medical treatment for her, which, to give an idea, would be the equivalent of 22 months' salary for Mr Khampha above, or the sale price of 7 or 8 fine fully grown buffaloes.

Mr Phongsavath's huge household lived in a large ramshackle traditional style Lao house on stilts. Each sub-unit had its own quarters, but there was almost no furniture and neither piped water nor electricity were connected. Mr Phongsavath complained sadly that as the years went by it became more and more impossible to make ends meet. His basic sacrifice had been the education of his children. Although both he and his wife had spent two years in primary school in their youth, and his eldest daughter had had two years in school before they left the south, the next five had had no education at all, and only the two youngest were both now in the third year of the local primary school.

(Mr Phongsavath's household score was 2,205, but the score per head was 170, which put them 32nd out of 52 families. Even this position was of course thanks to his three buffaloes and five individual incomes. It did not allow for the expenditure on his wife's illness, and therefore represents their potential, since they were certainly among the village's poorest families.)

Household C: Mrs Bounthan

Mrs Bounthan was the 43 year old widow of a soldier. She worked as a seamstress, stitching army uniforms. She received a fixed sum for each uniform completed, but could not normally earn more than 20,000 kip a month, which was equivalent to the very lowest urban wages. She also received half a sack of rice a month from the army as a kind of widow's pension. This covered half the family's rice needs. Out of her earnings she had to provide for four children aged between 22 and 11 and the young wife of her eldest son.

Both the son, and his wife who came from Thailand, had finished primary school, but neither had been able to find a job. The three younger boys were still in primary school, but far behind the classes appropriate to their age group.

The family, crammed into a tiny, traditional style house, had no possessions of any value, no piped water, no electricity, and was one of the few households without a radio. Mrs Bounthan claimed, however, that five years previously, before her husband's death, they had lived quite adequately. Now she would need to be paid four times as much for her work to attain a reasonable standard of living. What worried her most, though, were her unemployed son and daughter-in-law. It would be very easy for them to slip into a life of crime or delinquency.

(Mrs Bounthan's household score was 360, and their score per head 60, the second lowest in Ban Savang.)

Household D: Mr Phengsouk

My cases so far have been of families struggling in relative poverty. Mr Phengsouk is third in the Ban Savang household ratings (3,735), and 6th in the per head list (534). He is a soldier aged 40, born in Vientiane, who had attended four years of secondary school. His wife, also born in Vientiane, had attended primary school for five years. They have six children, aged from 14 to 2. They came to Ban Savang 11 years previously, because of its strategic position half way between the town (with its schools) and the plot of land they own in a village just outside Vientiane. Ban Savang is also handy for the army camp where Mr Phengsouk works.

While he is at work, his wife runs a rice mill which they established on their agricultural land outside Vientiane. She and their employees also look after 20 pigs, 200 ducks and 200 chickens. At weekends and in the evenings after work Mr Phengsouk goes over on his motorcycle to help on the farm. This year they have also decided to work the rice field themselves, rather than let it out to tenant farmers.

It is not surprising that neither Mr Phengsouk nor his wife are very often to be found in their home, which is looked after by an 18 year old niece who has been living with them for five years. Also living with them is a nephew who works in Vientiane, but has recently separated from his wife.

Their house is well constructed traditional style, but made from fine hard wood, with parts of the ground floor enclosed with brick walls to provide storage space. The living quarters upstairs are furnished with fairly new furniture and there is an electric fan, a refrigerator and a radio. In addition to Mr Phengsouk's motorcycle, the family also

has a bicycle.

Mr Phengsouk's basic salary as a soldier is 25,000 kip a month. He sees it as totally unrealistic - 120,000 kip would be more appropriate. Of course the family makes ends meet through its other activities, with the rice mill bringing in about 25,000 kip a week.

Mr Phengsouk has only been able to achieve his comparative wealth through his good fortune in inheriting some land and getting a good general education, and through the tremendous amount of work he and his wife put in to the family business.

Household E: Mr Phoumi

Finally a household of about average wealth for Ban Savang.

Mr Phoumi is a junior officer in the police. He came to Vientiane in 1958 when he was 28 years old from his home village in the far south of Laos, bringing his wife and their two young children. At the time he had been in the army, but transferred to the police in Vientiane. He moved to Ban Savang, where his elder brother had bought some land, in 1961 and built the family home, which, though a substantial well built traditional style house, is somewhat overcrowded. They now have ten children aged 1 to 19. Mr Phoumi's brother's two teenage sons, at school in Vientiane, live with them during term time.

His eldest son (19) has recently left school and joined the police, but even though the household finances are stretched to the limit, Mr Phoumi wants his other children to continue their studies as far as possible.

Mr Phoumi's own salary of 38,000 kip is quite insufficient. He would find 80,000 just adequate, and that is allowing for the income he gets from a small trading business run by his wife. In addition he receives the rent of his fields in his home village which are being let out to tenants under the supervision of a nephew. This provides him with the equivalent of about one quarter of the family's annual rice needs.

Mr Phoumi has a motorcycle, and the rest of the family share a bicycle. They have a radio, and electricity is connected, though there are no appliances except lighting. The two nephews bring their rice rations with them when they return from their holidays in the south. If things got really desperate, Mr Phoumi has half a dozen cows back on the farm in his home village which could be sold.

Would he like to go back to his old home? No, his ideal would be to find some agricultural land in the Vientiane plain which he could farm while carrying out the duties of a local policeman.

Mr Phoumi's household score is 1,381, but their per head score is only 105. This does not include the six cows and income from his rice fields in the south, however.

8. The evolution of the Lao urban economy

So far in this chapter I have drawn a picture of the Lao national economy in the twentieth century, which starts with a minimal investment in the economic infrastructure by the French colonial authorities up until the Second World War, followed by an uncertain period from 1946 to 1954 during which the French increased their inputs in the context of the First Indo-China War. Then, from 1955, a sudden influx of 'windfall' foreign exchange transformed the urban economy, encouraging a huge expansion in urban population, without, however, ensuring the emergence of any industrial development to support the finances of the towns when the 'windfall' foreign exchange was withdrawn. I have indicated that as donor countries reduced their commitments, so the foreign exchange inputs became increasingly insufficient to meet the needs which the urban economy had come to assume, since news of the money available in the towns had encouraged more and more people to migrate there. Finally I have given examples of how the economic position of some individual families has declined in recent years owing to the failure of the government to use the massive cash inputs of early years to finance any durable sources of revenue. However, I have not so far provided much data on these developments, and this should now be rectified.

The reasons which caused various governments, particularly that of the United States, to take such a close interest in the fate of Laos from 1955 onwards are not the province of this thesis, though the historical background has been referred to in Chapter Two. Suffice it to say that over a number of years the US government spent more on economic aid to Laos per head of population than in any other country of the world. Bare statistics can give little impression of the impact,

but it is perhaps worth quoting a few.[1] Between 1955 and 1973 declared US government economic assistance to Laos was US $845,624,000 of which $389,107,000 was 'Project Assistance', $439,051,000 was fiscal aid (the 'windfall' foreign exchange referred to above) and $17,466,000 was PL-480 food aid.[2] Of the Project Assistance $22,225,000 was listed as 'Military Technical Support'. In fact, of course, US government and CIA expenditures on military activities in Laos were many times higher than that, and were separately accounted for, but the actual figures involved have not been disclosed. Project Assistance also covered General Technical Support, Civil Police Administration, Air Support, Narcotics Control and Refugee Relief and Resettlement to a total of $188,159,000, which means that only some $178,723,000 out of the $864 million total was spent on actual development programmes during the 19 years period. This covered all US assistance for agriculture, industry, roads, rural economy, health, education and development administration.

The 'non-project assistance', or fiscal aid, of $439 million went to finance the deficit of the Lao national budget. To take two sample years:

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1. The figures which follow are taken from USAID's (1973) Facts on Foreign Aid to Laos and from the Lao government's annual statistics (Royaume du Laos (1971, 1973)).

2. PL-480 (Public Law 480) is a US government programme for the shipment of US grain surpluses to developing countries.

Table 23 Royal Lao Government budget for 1968 and 1972
Expenditures and revenues - in millions of US dollars

	1968	1972
Expenditures		
Civil	10.9	17.4
Police	2.0	2.1
Military	13.7	15.4
Total	26.4	34.9
Revenues		
Customs	8.6	4.9
Taxation	3.5	6.4
Total	12.1	11.4
Deficit	14.3	23.5

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So it can be seen that while expenditure increased between 1968 and 1972 by 32% (civil service expenditure increasing by 60%), revenues were actually down over the period by 6% (largely due to Vientiane's loss of its place as a centre of the gold market). Thus the budget deficit increased over the period by 64% at a time when donor governments were preparing to cut their financial commitments.

As from 1964 this large budget deficit was financed mainly by the Foreign Exchange Operations Fund (FEOF), which administered the 'windfall' foreign exchange payments. From 1964 to 1972 a total of US $172.1 million was contributed by the five countries with a high point of US $26.6 million in 1971. The sums contributed were:

United States	$121.7 million
United Kingdom	15.4
France	14.9
Japan	14.2
Australia	5.9
	172.1

Before 1964 total US assistance had been $376 million, of which $214 million was in straight cash grants, $75 million had been spent on the United States Commodity Import Programme (UNIP), which is referred to above as "the subsidised imports programme", and $87 million had been for Project Assistance.

(a) The trade balance, inflation and the money supply

As the budget deficit increased, so the gap between imports and exports got wider:

Table 24 Laos - Imports and exports 1966, 1970 and 1973

	Imports (000s of kip)	Exports (000s of kip)	Percentage deficit	Approx. deficit (in US dollars)
1966	10,017,159	357,725	96.4	19,318,868 ($ = 500 kip)
1970	27,329,106	1,726,705	93.7	51,204,802 ($ = 500 kip)
1973	34,304,050	3,044,674	91.1	52,098,960 ($ = 600 kip)

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As imports and government expenditure increased, so did the money supply, from 10 billion kip in 1965 to 30 billion in 1974. Naturally enough inflation followed. Inflation, however, only really began to bite seriously in 1973, when it became clear that the US government was not going to continue automatically financing the ever-increasing deficits, and indeed began to reduce its activities in Laos as a whole. The general price index rose:

Base	1964	100
	July 1973	250
	July 1974	380

It was, of course, this movement in prices, not compensated for by a rise in salaries, which caused the financial distress among the urban salaried employees, which I have described above.

(b) Industrial development

It might have been expected that this massive input of funds (and I have not mentioned the development project assistance provided by other donors, both governmental and multilateral, which was considerable) would have promoted the establishment of industrial enterprises for the processsing of exportable raw materials, thus creating some kind of firm base for the urban economy. Unfortunately, this was not the case, as can be seen from the value of exports noted above. Of the 3,044 million kip earned in 1973, 898 million (29%) came from the production of two tin mines near Thakkek and 1,939 million (64%) came from the export of wood. All other exports totalled 207 million kip (US $345,000) (7%). The increase in the official export of wood was what accounted for the relative improvement in the export figures between 1966 and 1973. Although there were a number of small businesses making furniture and one plywood factory, most of the wood was exported as lumber and even in 1973 it is clear that official figures represented perhaps 20% of the actual value of the wood that was exported from Laos to Thailand. Industrial development for processing raw materials for export was minimal, but the picture was quite different where processing imported raw materials for local consumption was concerned. The list published by the Lao government in 1973 of 1,377 private businesses, not including the tin mines, contains 85 mechanical saw mills, the plywood factory, 4 wooden flooring factories and 17 furniture factories, of which at least part of the production might be expected to go for export. The remaining 1,270 firms on the list (given in full in Appendix 3) are all aimed at local consumption. They are headed by 182 tailors, 136 rice mills, 110 garages, 89 jewellers, 79 beauty parlours, 77 petrol pumps, 70 hairdressers, 70 printers and 56 soft drink manufacturers, continuing further down with 29 distilleries

producing 2.4 million litres of alcohol, 28 edible ice makers (54,928 tons), 20 ice cream makers, and so on. Virtually all these industries relied at least partially on the import of essential raw materials, but, as we have seen, these imports could only be obtained while supplies of 'windfall' foreign exchange were guaranteed. In 1973 exports were worth less than 10% of the value of imports. If foreign aid were to cease, then Laos would have to do without 90% of its annual imports and many of these 1,377 businesses would obviously have to close. This was the situation which was approaching in 1974 as American aid was reduced.[1]

9. The rural and urban economies

In this chapter on the rural and urban economies I have tried to lay down an economic base on which the discussion in the next two chapters on social and political features may proceed. I have in particular not treated a number of features of urban society which, while they have important economic causes and consequences are more easily treated in the chapter on 'society'. I am thinking of features like crime, prostitution, gambling, alcoholism, drug abuse and juvenile delinquency. When looking at them in Chapter Seven, I shall of course refer to the economic conditions in which they have taken root.

In this final section I want to draw together some of the strands put out above, into a picture of the economic relations existing between rural and urban areas in Laos in 1973-74, and see how this relationship affected villages like Ban Phon Sung and Ban Savang.

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1. It was finally reached in the middle of 1975 when all US government aid stopped, presaging the end of FEOF later that year. (See Appendix 1.)

First of all it should be clear by now that the economic relationship at an organised national level between town and countryside was tenuous. While some rural areas, particularly those near the towns, had sacrificed aspects of their traditional self-sufficiency, and were integrating gradually into a wider market economy, most villages still basically depended on subsistence agriculture for their survival. The urban economy, on the other hand, was financed and equipped almost entirely from overseas. There were no plantations in the countryside, nor any rural industry supplying the towns. Forestry, most of whose production went straight from the forest into Thailand, at best being transformed beforehand into timber at a saw mill, was the only significant rural industry. Some food products from the countryside found their way into town, but the bulk of Vientiane's food was imported from Thailand. Similarly the market in the countryside for goods processed in Vientiane was limited. Felt needs for such goods remained small, and since most rural villagers had little cash income, their purchases were few. One gets a picture then of two more or less independent economic complexes which interacted only at the edges.

This picture should not be exaggerated, however. If commercial relations between town and country were insignificant, economic contacts at the level of individuals and families were important. I have shown how many urban households depended in the later years on rice grown by their rural relatives. Indeed a considerable number of Vientiane municipality residents continue to gain their principal livelihood from agriculture. I do not therefore wish to suggest that there was some kind of economic wall separating town from countryside.

Some town-dwellers received rice from their country relatives. In return they provided accommodation for cousins and nephews who came to study in the city, and introduced them to the ways of city life.

At a formal level this service was provided by regional associations,[1] but their activities were limited, and the ties of kinship or common village origin were far more important.

It is clear that in the initial stages of the urban economic boom, the spin-off which ought perhaps to have accrued to the rural areas in agricultural development programmes, in fact often reached those areas in the form of financial support from villagers who were doing well in town. In addition, politicians and regional officials from urban families began to seek votes in the countryside under the new parliamentary system. They spent parts of their new wealth in ensuring the electoral support of different villages. They and other wealthy townspeople also enjoyed making occasional visits to the countryside for village festivals, and rural leaders soon discovered that these occasions were ideal opportunities to obtain funds for the vat, the school or the dispensary. Village leaders would send invitations to city big shots known to have an interest in their area. One politician confided in me that he never accepted such invitations any more, since he simply could not afford it, the amounts of money he was expected to spend at the festivals were so colossal.

I have described the mechanics of the decline of the urban economy from about 1968 to 1974. The consequences for the future economic relationship between town and country were most immediately that the rural economy, not very greatly altered from the rural economy of a century before, was beginning to look positively healthy in comparison with the urban situation. In the longer term it was clearly imperative

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1. See Chapter 6.

that a basis for a formal economic link between town and country be created, if the city of Vientiane was to survive. This would obviously have to start in the countryside, since the city could no longer process imported goods which it could not afford, and it certainly could not manufacture goods for export without some raw materials.

These considerations, however, were far from the minds of the residents of Ban Savang as they struggled to maintain their standards of living in 1974 in a rapidly declining economy, just as they were far from the minds of Ban Phon Sung inhabitants when they began to feel the increasing demands for help from their urban relatives, demands which they considered in the evening darkness of their unlit houses - unlit because they had sold all the resin trees in the village, and the government could no longer afford the foreign exchange needed to import the kerosene for their lamps.

CHAPTER SIX VILLAGE AND TOWN - TWO POLITICAL WORLDS

This chapter sets out to consider the evolution of the relationship between the village and the town as political entities. It starts with the assumption that ritual performances can tell us something about the way hierarchical relationships are established, maintained and eventually challenged. The "legitimate order of inequality"[1] is explained in myth, reaffirmed in ritual, and frequently institutionalised in everyday gestures and vocabulary. However, the degree to which this legitimising ideology may correspond with actual relationships in a specific place and at a given time will depend on how successful the holders of authority are in translating their theoretical superiority into actual power.

In Laos, the ideology behind the creation of a village, and that behind the foundation of a capital city, present interesting contrasts, which, when mirrored in everyday political relationships, make for clear distinctions in political life between villages and towns. I discuss these rural and urban contrasts through studies of the historical background, and subsequently through an analysis of the political life of the two research villages. I try to show how the introduction of new organisational systems, based on an imported Western ideology, has affected political relations in both town and village. Finally I look at the impact of voluntary associations on urban life, both as an expression of group solidarity and as attempts to mobilise political support, and I examine the difficulties they have had in establishing themselves. These difficulties can be seen as symptomatic of conflicts between at least two competing ideologies of political behaviour. In this particular case an institution conceived in Western democratic

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1. Bloch (1977) p. 289.

terms cannot easily run under principles of traditional village politics.

The village

I have already suggested that the village, bān, is the most significant unit of political organisation among the ethnic Lao. This statement should now be explained and discussed.

The village is, first of all, the basic unit of settlement. It is a spatial unit, defined in the rural areas by identifiable geographical boundaries. It also normally represents a single act of settlement creation, by which a group of people tame the forest and make it habitable for their families. A village may also be 'founded' by taking over abandoned land, but the initial settlement act has still been made in the past by previous inhabitants of the site.

Political ideology of the village

The act of opening up a stretch of forest for human habitation involves contact with spiritual forces through ritual communication. It can therefore be seen as the first move in the building up of a village political ideology. Lao settlers believe they must obtain the agreement of the spirits of the locality, or subdue them by superior spiritual force. In either case the presence of a talented individual, who can negotiate with the spirits, is essential. Negotiations are undertaken by means of ceremonial chanting, imprecations and the offering of animal sacrifices. The spirits signal their submission by allowing the village and its inhabitants to prosper. If the spirits have not been appeased, they cause illness to strike or the crops to fail. The decision must then be made either to abandon the particular site as inauspicious, or to intensify the efforts to appease the spirits.

Although the founding of a village inevitably involves a certain number of people, the founder of the village, its first leader or headman, is the man who successfully negotiated with the spirits. His negotiations include the promise of a regular ritual sacrifice, which he performs himself during his life time. The founder of the village is then a talented man with exceptional powers of communication with the spirit world. In Buddhist terms he is also a man of exceptional merit, bun, whose former lives have fitted him for this onerous task.

Upon the death of the first headman the remaining villagers are confronted with a problem. The man whose powers guaranteed their security is no longer with them. A successor may be appointed, indeed the dead man will almost certainly have nominated his replacement, but there is no guarantee that the new man has the same powers. In fact he is inevitably unfamiliar with the nuances of the deal worked out with the spirits of the locality.

The solution has been to appoint the founder of the village to be the village spirit, phī bān, or more fully phī haksā bān, 'the spirit protecting the village'. The villagers may thereafter relate to the spirits of the locality through the mediation of their own founder. They therefore enter into a bargain with him to provide regular sacrifices to 'feed the spirit', līang phī, in return for his continued protection.[1]

Later in this chapter I describe a buffalo sacrifice which I witnessed in Ban Phon Sung, designed to līang phī. The description

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1. Condominas (1975) Phī bān cults in rural Laos deals with these ceremonies and a buffalo sacrifice is described in Lévy (1943).

shows how every family in the village contributed to the cost of the sacrifice and benefited, both spiritually and physically, from its execution. One aspect of the role of the headman in the village is defined by his responsibility for ensuring that the sacrifice is correctly performed. The mǭ cham (or chao cham), officiant of the cult to the phī bān, who recites the ritual formulas, is appointed by the headman,[1] but the headman is responsible for the general organisation of the ceremonies.

In the ideology of the village the headman is the successor of the founder of the village. He is also, with the mǭ cham, a mediator between the villagers and the spirit world which controls their contact with the natural environment. His legitimacy in the role of headman is regularly reasserted by the performance of the līang phī ritual, in which villagers recognise their debt to the phī bān and thereby also recognise the authority of his successor.

Political organisation of the village

The village, however, is not a perfectly harmonious unit living in splendid isolation. A number of activities of practical importance need to be organised, and the headman (nai bān or phǭ bān), with his authority derived from a ritual performance, is the man to do it. There are three basic categories of activity: the organisation of the community for particular events or actions, the maintenance of relations with the exterior, and the settlement of disputes. In practice, however, the headman's actual authority in these matters depends considerably on his own personality and his relations with other villagers.

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1. Condominas (1975) p. 259 reports an instance where the headman was also the chao cham.

He may, in extreme cases, be little more than a spokesman or figure-head. Important decisions are invariably referred to a council of elders, subject to ratification by an assembly of all householders. The council, numbering about a dozen men, constitutes itself around the village headman, and in broad terms its composition should satisfy every householder that his interests are not overlooked. Equally, it includes everyone who may have something useful to say on a given topic, so its membership is potentially fluid, and it does not formally seek to exclude anybody who wishes to participate in its debates. While there are a few men whose absence means that no decision can be taken, there will be others who are invited from time to time.

The normal debating procedure is that a topic is discussed until everyone has finished what they have to say. The headman then espouses a position which he believes acceptable to all. If there are no objections, then that is a decision, and in the case of an important matter it can be put to a general village meeting, where the procedure is the same. If one of the village elders feels he has been outmanoeuvred and his ideas rejected by the majority, or indeed that a minority has obtained its wishes against the majority opinion, there are various tactics available to him. He may decide to protest by not going to the village meeting and sending his son to represent him instead. If he feels more strongly, he can refuse to go and in addition encourage a friend to protest that a decision cannot be taken in his absence. If he is lucky, this may result in the matter being permanently shelved. The accepted way of dealing with an impasse, therefore, is usually to do nothing. To do nothing offends nobody. To embark on a course of action may alienate up to half the population.

While the rule of consensus limits the actual power or influence of the headman, the various activities for which he is nominally responsible are at least partly devolved onto others. The 'organisation of the community for particular events' comprises such things as community construction efforts and the organisation of religious festivals. The building of roads or the damming of streams are proposed at a meeting of the elders, and active support sought at an assembly of householders. Annual religious festivals are organised mainly by former monks who are familiar with the details and are in regular contact with the monks themselves.

Political relationships with other villages concern questions such as the demarcation of boundaries, the exchange of marriage partners and again the organisation of festivals. Clearly it is in everybody's interest that these questions be treated as harmoniously as possible, and the headman may make use of villagers with a particular expertise in such negotiations, or somebody who himself comes from the village involved. The role of the village headman in external affairs is therefore first to represent the village in its relations with other villages. He may also in fact represent it in contacts with higher political authority, but since he does not obtain his legitimacy from that higher authority, his own position is not affected if the higher levels are absent.

Finally, as a mediator in disputes, the headman usually acts as informal president of a group of senior men invited by the participants to give their opinion on the merits of the cases put forward. Their function is ideally to propose solutions acceptable to all parties. It seems to be recognised that judgment is not much use within a village context unless it is generally agreed to be appropriate.

The organisation of Buddhist festivals brings us in touch for the first time with an element of political organisation at a higher level. Buddhism represents another ideology, basically foreign to the idea of the village as an independent unit, for it has flourished thanks to the support of supra-local political systems. We shall see below that although the ideologies of Hindu-Brahman kingship and Theravada Buddhism were in some senses quite strongly opposed, Buddhism provided support and legitimacy for South-East Asian kings, while trying to encourage moderation in political activity.

The organisation of Buddhism closely paralleled that of the secular state authority which sought to impose itself on village life, but it was a more attractive and less demanding institution. The physical presence of monks in their vat in the village also perhaps allowed Buddhism to maintain a place in village life even when the hierarchy, of which they were a part, had collapsed. The justification for the presence of monks in the village, independent if necessary of any superior hierarchy, is found in the form of the phī khun vat (beneficent spirit of the vat), who is the spirit of the first abbot of the vat.[1] The present abbot is therefore both the successor of the original abbot, whose memory is kept alive in a little spirit house just inside the vat fence, and the representative of a superior religious hierarchy. Which of these roles is the more significant will depend on the circumstances of the time and the locality.

In practice the existence of a Buddhist organisation beyond the level of the village is acknowledged at the religious festivals which require the presence of a large number of monks, particularly the Bun

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1. Condominas (1975) p. 259.

Phavēt, and the opposition between Buddhism, as a force tending to unite a wider social community, with the spirit-cults, which tend to assert the independence of the village, is well pointed out by the way in which their cults are organised. While the lĭang phī bān ceremony specifically excludes participation from outside the village, and the village may be off-limits to strangers for up to three days, the Buddhist Bun Phavēt absolutely requires the participation of monks and laymen from other villages.

Within the traditional Lao village, founded by the taming of the forest, there is no ritual performance to connect the village in a direct political relationship with any superior authority. Nor is there any agent of such authority resident in the village. As we shall see, powerful rulers have frequently tried to assert their authority over villages, but the relationship, in the absence of a legitimizing ideology or ritual, remained ambiguous. The village was always potentially an autonomous political unit.

The town, the state and the king

In a recent book discussing South-East Asian cosmologies, Quaritch-Wales[1] gives more importance than has been usual to pre-Indian concepts among the peoples of the region. In particular he takes the example of the Lao myths of origin recorded by Archaimbault,[2] which describe the recreation of the earth after a flood, the imposition of order by a king sent down from heaven called Khun Burom, and the implantation of a royal line in Luang Prabang which regulates the rights of the Lao to land originally colonised by the 'aborigines', the Mon-Khmer speaking

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1. Quaritch-Wales (1977) The Universe Around Them.
2. Archaimbault (1973d).

hill-peoples, or 'Kha'. This arrangement is legitimized by various regular rituals, including the game of hockey, tī khī, which Archaimbault sees as symbolising the contest between the Lao and the Kha and the eventual concession of their rights by the Kha.[1]

It may be wondered how far such myths and the rituals which recall them have in fact escaped the influence of the Hindu-Brahman and Buddhist concepts which came to dominate South-East Asian kingship. They are perhaps nevertheless evidence for an indigenous ideology of urban settlement and centralised administration.

Whatever the relative importance of these pre-Indian ideas, the basic significance of what Heine-Geldern calls the 'cosmo-magic principle',[2] imported into South-East Asia from India, and perhaps also known in different forms from China, should not be underestimated. The belief in the parallel between the macrocosmos and the microcosmos, the universe and the world of men, and the need for men to be in harmony with universal forces, defined attitudes not only to kingship and state authority, but ultimately to questions as mundane as what time one should set out if making a journey in a westerly direction on a Thursday.

The types of political ideology promoted by these ideas were basically three. Where Hinduism dominated, "the king was considered to be either an incarnation of a god or a descendant from a god or both".[3] The god being incarnated was usually Siva, though sometimes Vishnu. Where Theravada Buddhism was the religion, the king could not incarnate a god, although he might represent Indra on earth. However, the main motivating force in the religion was karma, the store of

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1. Quaritch-Wales, op.cit., pp. 20-21; Archaimbault (1973b). See also Chapter Three.

2. Heine-Geldern (1956) p. 1.

3. Ibid., p. 7.

'merit' from previous lives. "Under these circumstances the theory of rebirth and of karma was bound to induce monarchs with a very high idea of their religious merits to consider themselves as Bodhisatvas".[1] A Bodhisatva is the last incarnation of a man who has chosen to delay his entry into Nirvana in order to help his people to know the Buddhist way and themselves progress along the path towards Nirvana. The Buddhist king therefore identified himself as a human ideal, where in Hindu thought he was a divine incarnation.

The third type of kingship ideology in the region is that based on the Chinese model. Here the Emperor may represent the deities, but he does not incarnate them. The basis of the Chinese state came to be the stability of its civil service, which could maintain political order in the regions, even if chaos and corruption were rife at the centre.

Leach[2] has analysed the contrasting influence in Burma of Indian and Chinese political ideals, and has shown how the Indian-type ideas of 'charismatic kingship' encouraged instability, tyranny and regular usurpation of the throne. The concentration of all power and authority in the hands of the divine king meant that there was no permanent bureaucracy, since official posts were in the gift of the king and their occupants could be changed at will. For much of the time the existence of a Buddhist clerical hierarchy in Burma over which the king had little control acted as only a limited brake on the excesses of wilful monarchs. The philosophy of kingship, while allowing occasional periods of magnificence, inevitably plunged the country into frequent strife and chaos.

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1. Ibid., p. 9.
2. Leach (1960).

In China, by contrast, "the succession was governed by law",[1] usurpation was relatively rare, and the bureaucracy perpetuated itself independently of an individual emperor's possible desire to staff it entirely with his own appointees.

While the ideologies of Hinduism and Buddhism differ as to the nature of the king's person, they converge with regard to the nature of the state. The capital city was the centre of the empire, a representation of the centre of the universe, Mount Meru. The precise details of the beliefs in different places vary[2] but the result tended to be the same. While the king claimed sovereignty over a vast empire, his actual control over all but its most central part was usually tenuous.

> "The typical 'Burma' state consisted of a small fully administered territorial nucleus having the capital at the centre. Round about, stretching in all directions, was a region over which the king claimed suzerainty and from the inhabitants of which he extracted tribute by threat of military force".[3]

Where the Chinese emperor ruled over a nation with identifiable frontiers, much along the lines of a modern state, the South-East Asian king ruled directly over a city-state, and indirectly over as much of the surrounding countryside as possible.

The king was in many ways bound to his capital city by its crucial importance for his own legitimacy. King, state and city were very much part of a single complex of ideals, which, as we shall see, were regularly expounded in the rituals of royal legitimacy performed within the city. The rural areas, conceptually included within the empire though they might be, were nevertheless outside the city and therefore in some senses opposed to it.

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1. Ibid., p. 57.
2. cf. Heine-Geldern, op. cit.
3. Leach, op.cit., p. 58.

Lao kingship, statehood and urban development

The precise origins of the Lao kingdom are probably impossible to extricate from the web of myth and conflicting historical evidence. I suggested in Chapter Two that where small groups of Tai migrants had been settling in the Mekong valley alongside the indigenous Mon-Khmer speaking inhabitants from the very early centuries AD, or even before, there appears to have been a military invasion at some time which displaced the 'aborigines' from the Luang Prabang valley and established a capital city there.

If Archaimbault's interpretation is correct,[1] the Lao kings regularly reaffirmed their legitimacy to rule on the site, not only by receiving the ritual concession of rights by the original inhabitants, the 'Kha', but by acting as intermediaries with the world of the tutelary spirits, both of the waters surrounding the town, and of the land on which it was constructed, of whom the most powerful were none other than the spirits of their own ancestors, who would be incarnated in the body of a medium on specific ritual occasions.

By 1353, when Fa Ngum returned from Angkor to unite the Lao people under one sovereign, there had clearly been a city on the site for some time already, and the complex of Buddhist ideals of kingship could begin to be grafted onto those of the existing philosophy, though how far this had already been 'indianized' is a matter for debate.

What was the nature of the political authority exercised by Fa Ngum and his great successors such as Setthathirath and Souligna Vongsa, and what sort of relations were established between the various levels in the political hierarchy? I have suggested that ideals are most

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1. Archaimbault (1973b).

clearly expressed through ritual communication. In this case we can include under that umbrella the levels of gesture, vocabulary and actual performance of rites. Basically the relationships defined in these modes were those of superiority and inferiority, and the more sophisticated the ritual expression, the more precisely the ideal relationship was defined.

We know less about the detailed ritual life of the royal courts of Laos than we do about Siam,[1] largely because the kingdoms had been so seriously weakened by the time of French colonisation that much ritual had, one imagines, been lost. There was, however, a similar distinction made between royalty, sū'a chao, - 'the line of princes', various echelons of mandarins, khārāsakān - 'the king's servants', the clergy sangha (sangkha), on the one hand, and the ordinary people, rāsadǭn, on the other. Relationships between and within these two groups were defined by ritual communication.

The simplest example is the relationship between clergy and laymen. At the beginning of the ceremony of Buddhist ordination the candidate prostrates himself three times before his mother and asks her forgiveness for the faults he has committed. He is reaffirming the ideal relationship of inferiority of the son to the mother. One hour later, at the end of the ceremony, when the new monk is wearing his saffron robes, his mother comes and prostrates herself three times in front of her son, and offers him gifts, which he accepts simply by touching them after she has put them down in front of him. Her act symbolically reaffirms the inferiority of the layman towards the monk.

The first type of ritual communication which defines relationships within a political hierarchy is therefore gesture, and it is one of the

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1. Quaritch-Wales (1931).

most significant, since it is in constant use. All his subjects prostrate themselves in front of the king except Buddhist monks, and all laymen, including the king, prostrate themselves before monks. An inferior in the political hierarchy signals his impression of the degree of superiority which an official possesses by the degree of his obeisance. For example, the standard method of greeting between civilians is to join one's hands in front of one's chest, fingers outstretched, and to make a little bow. The inferior of two people makes the gesture first, and signals the status distance between himself and the other man by the height to which he raises his hands and the depth of his bow. For instance, at the school where I taught, pupils coming to see the headmaster would raise their hands and lower their heads at the same time, so that their fingertips touched their foreheads. If the headmaster bothered to respond at all to the gesture, he would just raise his hands to the level of his chest without making a bow.

If gesture is an easily visible illustration of political relationships vocabulary is a much more subtle one. The Lao language has separate vocabularies for speaking to mandarins, monks and royalty. The basic distinction between these vocabularies and ordinary village speech is that they employ words borrowed from Pali, the language of the Buddhist texts. This is further evidence of the close link between political and religious ideologies, and the use of religious concepts to justify the political hierarchy. Specifically, all the terms for the king, of which there are a number, begin with the prefix phra, indicating 'sacred', a word which when used on its own means 'monk'. Most remarkable perhaps is that the word phraphutthachao is the standard word for 'the Buddha', while phraphutthachaolūang means 'the late King', a clear indication that the king is thought to enter Nirvana as a Buddha upon his death.

The language appropriate for addressing the king is virtually unknown outside the royal capital of Luang Prabang. Informants told of their amusement when the king went on an inspection trip in the countryside. Even in villages not very far from Luang Prabang elderly villagers might address him with the familiar 'you', while younger people used terms of address appropriate for addressing government officials. Well educated civil servants in Vientiane would brush up their vocabulary specially, if they were due to meet the king. The vocabulary appropriate for addressing monks is naturally more widely known - at least the basic elements of it - and the same is true of the vocabulary for addressing mandarins. In both cases, however, the urban population which is constantly involved in the ritual communication of the political hierarchy is far better versed in the details and nuances of vocabulary than the rural population.

The rituals which define political relations can be divided into the general and the specific. The general ritual is a ceremony called the bāsī which is offered by inferiors to a superior, both annually at the New Year, and on appropriate occasions such as the superior's departure or arrival at his post. The royal bāsī is offered to the king at New Year by his mandarins. During the preceding days officials have offered a series of similar ceremonies to their department heads or ministers. Over the same period children do it for their parents. During the rest of the year villagers will prepare a bāsī in the honour of any senior official or member of the royal family who happens to visit their village.

The bāsī may be extremely simple, and last a few minutes, or enormously elaborate, depending on the rank of the person being honoured and the opinion which those offering the ceremony have of that person.

It is made up of the same core ceremony, the sūkhuan - 'calling the souls', as the rites of passage described in the next chapter. Tambiah has noted Brahman influences in the ceremony,[1] but the mǭ phǭn - 'the wishing practitioner' is eclectic in his choice of sources, switching from Pali to the vernacular and invoking principles of Buddhism and the spirit-cults in the lilting chant with which he wishes the beneficiary long life, prosperity and happiness on behalf of those who have laid on the ceremony. During the ceremony the beneficiary is seated in the place of honour, nang thoeng - 'seated high', separated from the mǭ phǭn by a silver bowl (the phā khuan - the 'soul's dish') containing a mound of flowers topped by a candle. The audience of subordinates sits behind the mǭ phǭn nang tam - 'seated low'. This distinguishes the bāsī from the rite of passage sūkhuan for a marriage, for instance, in which the mǭ phǭn normally 'sits high' with the elders and parents behind him, while the couple 'sits low' on the other side of the phā khuan with their friends gathered behind them.

The most important 'specific' ceremony related to the political ideology of the kingdom is the oath of loyalty (sābān tua - to swear an oath, phithīthū'namphraphiphatsātchā- ceremony/hold/water/sacred/transform/judge/speak). In this ceremony the king's officials swear their loyalty to the king by drinking the sacred water and swearing that if they commit treason against the king, the sacred water will cause them to die in misery. The ceremony has in recent years taken place in Vientiane during the festival of That Luang, a ten-day celebration at Vientiane's greatest shrine. The oath-taking takes place, however, within one of the temples of the city itself, Wat Ong

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1. Tambiah (1970).

Tu. An official reads the ritual oath which begins by inviting Buddha and the spirits of the heavens, the earth and the waters to witness the ceremony. The oath itself, as summarised by P.S. Nginn, reads:

> "those of us who betray His Majesty the King of Laos and the Constitution will die in misery. They will descend into Hell and will suffer its tortures for centuries. If they are reborn in another world, they will not meet the Buddha, whose role is to work for the salvation of men.
>
> Those who recognise the king and are faithful to him, and also to the Lao Constitution, will remain under the protection of the Buddha and of all the tutelary spirits. They will not be hurt by weapons, they will escape all dangers. They will enjoy health, happiness and prosperity all their lives. Paradise will be open to them".[1]

The references to the Constitution have been added since 1947, but the text gives an idea of the fear which the king sought to imbue into his mandarins to persuade them to be loyal to him. His position as Bodhisatva and as intermediary with the tutelary spirits allowed him to invoke both Buddhist and spirit cult forces through ritual in support of his political control. The power of mandarins over the people was exercised therefore strictly in the name of the king. They were khārāsakān, servants of the king. Their positions in the political hierarchy, affirmed in regular ritual, were justified by the ideology which accorded power to the king.

Apart from the bāsī in honour of a visiting official, all the ritual concerned with the political hierarchy takes place in the towns. In recent years a few village headmen have been invited to participate in the oath-taking ceremony. With the exception of those villages closest to the town, however, rural dwellers have certainly remained

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1. Nginn (1967) p. 42.

ignorant to this day of the proper gestures, vocabularies, ritual ceremonies and politico-religious ideologies which justify the existence of the king and his mandarins. The variations in political relationships between king and subjects, mandarins, townsmen and rural dwellers will become more apparent in my discussion of the everyday implementation of political control.

The political organisation of the pre-colonial city-state

Chapter Two gave a brief account of the changing fortunes of the Lao kingdom between 1350 and the introduction of colonial rule in 1893. From the pinnacle of Souligna Vongsa's wealth and power in the 1690s to the misery of Chao Anou as he desperately roamed the country in 1828-29 with a dwindling band of supporters, trying to raise troops to recapture his throne, the whole gamut of success and failure was passed through. Fa Ngum, Samsenthai, Setthathirat and Souligna Vongsa were able to command military success and prosperity for their peoples by what often appears to have been the force of their personalities. All these reigns, however, were followed by disaster. The death of each of the last three named enabled the kingdom's enemies to profit from the weakness inherent in uncertain succession, and Fa Ngum himself was eventually banished from his throne, as his military victories had sent him into mad excesses of cruelty against the population.

Military success indeed appears to have been the sine qua non of a strong urban political economy. The king could with difficulty finance the building of temples and palaces from trade and local agricultural surpluses. The most abundant source of cheap labour was captured enemies, and the tributes demanded of defeated kings provided essential finance and equipment. It is not surprising, therefore, that official Lao history is a chronicle of victories and

defeats against the Burmese, Vietnamese, Siamese and Khmer, and also of the struggles between local princes with rival claims to political supremacy. The periods of Lao political and economic prosperity were those when one or more of the king's neighbours had been forced into submission and was being obliged to contribute regularly to the Lao coffers. The political history of mainland South-East Asia reminds one of a see-saw. The economic base of agriculture and related exploitation of raw materials was so little developed that it was practically impossible for all the urban kingdoms to be in the ascendant at any one time. As kings flourished, died and were replaced by weaker men or dynastic disputes, so the fortunes of their kingdoms fluctuated. The effect of these ups and downs was obviously far greater on the peoples of the towns and the areas immediately surrounding them. The countryside might be plundered by armies for food, and the villagers be forced to seek protection from a local potentate, but they were rarely involved in the political processes of kingship, and they were physically too distant and economically too backward to come under any sort of direct administrative control under normal circumstances.

There is little in the history to allow a much more sophisticated analysis of the kingdom's fluctuating fortunes. The influence of the weather on crop production and the passage of epidemics must have had an influence on economic prosperity, on the growth of population, and thus on the king's ability to engage in trade, promote the religion or undertake military campaigns. The situation of the king's neighbours is a factor in the political equation about which there is more information. The Burmese invasions of the mid-sixteenth century, for example, forced Setthathirath to move his capital from Luang Prabang to Vientiane, but this in fact put him in a better position to control the central and southern parts of the country including what is now North-East Thailand.

The strengths and weaknesses of the Annamese Emperors and the Siamese Kings were of course vital factors for the well-being of Lane Xang.[1] The most crucial factor, however, seems to have been the longevity of the king himself. Fa Ngum and Samsenthai ruled consecutively for 63 years. Setthathirath's reign of 23 years followed one of 27 years in which King Photisarath had devoted himself to the promotion of Buddhism and the suppression of the spirit-cults (in which he was notably unsuccessful), and Souligna Vongsa reigned from 1637 for 57 years. Sai-Tiakaphat reigned quietly for 41 years from 1438. Most of the other recorded Lao kings had brief reigns.

The political organisation which these kings developed to run their states spread its influence, therefore, as far as economic and military success would allow. One encouraged the other, and both together brought increased political control from the centre. My analysis of how the system worked shows how tenuous was administrative control of anything outside the capital city, and how closely linked to economic factors was the penetration of political control.

A complex ranking system developed in the capital. The organisation of the state was divided between military, civilian and trade/supply affairs, each with a royal prince at its head. Above these princes, however, and second only to the king, was the Chao Uparāt - 'second king' or 'viceroy'. This interesting office has sometimes been held by younger brothers of the king, but during certain periods it passed hereditarily from father to son. It was clearly designed so that the king would have somebody trustworthy to leave in charge of his capital when he was away, or to whom he could entrust a major

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1. 'Muong Lane Xang Hom Khao' (Mū'ang lān sāng hom khāo), 'the kingdom of the million elephants and the white parasol', is an ancient name for Laos.

army when required.[1] Each of the three sectors of state affairs was staffed by princes and commoner mandarins with a bewildering number of ranks and titles.

The only official whose duties kept him in the rural areas was the chao mū'ang, the district prince, whom the king appointed to administrative control over the rough equivalent of a modern province. The relations between the king and the chao mū'ang and between the chao mū'ang and his villagers, were evidently determined by a sort of perpetual balancing act. The king had the right of appointment, but the office of chao mū'ang frequently became hereditary. The king could call the chao mū'ang to his capital, but a strong chao mū'ang could defy a weak king. The chao mū'ang of Xieng Khouang, who considered himself a king in his own right, was unwise enough to reject Souligna Vongsa's request of 1651 for the hand of his daughter, and after negotiations failed, Xieng Khouang was duly sacked by Souligna Vongsa's forces. During the long periods of royal weakness, however, a chao mū'ang might ignore any obligations which had been extracted from his ancestors by previous kings.

The chao mū'ang's relations with his villagers are less easy to analyse. One crucial factor was that there never seems to have developed a class of land-owning officials. The chao mū'ang's family grew rice like everybody else, and he would seem to have obtained any extra income from the control of trade and the administration of justice. The mū'ang capitals are sited on trade routes, at market places. The

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1. The last Chao Uparāt was Prince Phetsarath, who died in 1959, after which the office was allowed to lapse. Phetsarath, who inherited the office from his father, was the eldest brother of Prince Souvanna Phouma, Prime Minister during my research period, and half-brother of Prince Souphanouvong, President of the Lao People's Democratic Republic.

chao mū'ang's principal function was almost certainly to organise and regulate what barter trade existed in the region, and, as far as his prestige allowed, to arbitrate in any disputes which arose beyond the village level. The chronicles of course mention the occasions on which chao mū'angs raised armies and came to the defence of their king. The impression given is that such efforts were ad hoc, and could only be achieved by persuading village leaders either of the danger of failing to resist marauding invaders, or that the spoils of victory would be so sweet that it was worth sending a few young men. The chao mū'ang was therefore very much an intermediary between the king and his remoter subjects. Except in exceptional circumstances the relations between the three parties were determined by the bargaining power of each. In order to extract economic tribute from villagers for the king, the chao mū'ang had to convince them that it was worth their while - that the king would or could protect them from bandits, and would provide food from his granaries if their harvest were to fail in future, and that the king was perfectly capable of coming to plunder their village if they did not pay.

'Traditional' political relations between village and town

How far the king might impose the ideology and the ritual communication of a national political system on the rural populations depended therefore to a considerable extent on his successful manipulation of political forces. If his army won battles, and his chao mū'angs were loyal and raised men and goods to help him win more battles, then he could reinforce the hold of the Buddhist-Brahman concepts of kingship over an even wider section of the populace.

Nevertheless a vital historical factor would always moderate the precise political relationship between king and villager: the

productivity of land which had been acquired for the villager by a military conquest of the king was thought to depend on the king's ability to maintain harmonious relations with the cosmos and with the spirits of the locality. A bad harvest could be imputed to the king's failure to carry out the proper rituals which ensured the support of spiritual forces.

In addition, Condominas suggests that there was in some cases a defined hierarchical relationship between the guardian spirit of the city, the phī haksā mū'ang, and the local village guardian spirits, the phī haksā bān.[1] He quotes Archaimbault[2] who describes how the officiants of the village spirit-cults came and erected a small replica of their hộ (spirit-house) near the altar of the phī mū'ang of Xieng Khouang at the time of the līang phī mū'ang festival there. He does not say, however, from how far away these officials had come. Certainly, the villages near Vientiane which Condominas studied, and where he found that their phī bān could be located in a hierarchy of spirits, were close to the city. One may suppose, I think, that these villagers had been, at some time at least, under the direct administrative control of the king, or had been allotted the land following military conquest.

Where land had been acquired by clearing and settling of a piece of virgin forest, it was more difficult for the king to impose such direct authority, just as it seems unlikely that the phī mū'ang[3] could

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1. Condominas (1975) p. 256.

2. Archaimbault (1967) p. 570.

3. Lévy (1943) describes a buffalo sacrifice for the phī mū'ang of Vientiane. The phī mū'ang in both Vientiane and Luang Prabang are associated with the voluntary human sacrifice of a pregnant woman, who leapt into a hole in which the lak mū'ang (lak = post/pillar) was then embedded. A regular animal sacrifice to her spirit ensures fertility and plenty.

make its influence felt on the founder spirit of a remote village.

The political ideology of outlying villages was therefore likely to remain basically independent of ritual or ideological involvement with the concepts of kingship.

Control over these villages had therefore to be maintained at the level of political bargaining, through the perceived mutual advantage of military protection, economic support and the settlement of disputes. Only through their usually unsophisticated belief in the Buddhist religion were these villages linked in any ideological sense to the king in his capital.

This analysis of the basic differences in political ideology between the cities, acquired by conquest and built in terms of a relationship with cosmological and religious forces, and most of the rural areas, where villagers did not feel themselves indebted to princes, helps to explain, I feel, the fragility of the Lao political system in the 500 years of its pre-colonial history. It may also explain to some extent the subsequent indifference of much of the population to calls from modern political leaders who wished to base political action on the principles of 'traditional' political ideology. I have tried to show that the 'traditional ideology' to which they were referring was an urban phenomenon whose impact in most rural areas was strictly limited.

French colonial intervention

As described in Chapter Two, the monarchy in Laos was at an unprecedented low ebb when the French arrived in the late nineteenth century. The Siamese to all intents and purposes controlled the lowland parts of the country. The French pushed out the Siamese, supported the king of Luang Prabang, allowed him to maintain his governmental organisation in the north of the country, (although a French resident was placed in Luang Prabang), but established more direct colonial rule in the centre and south of the country.

These moves were bound to create problems in terms of traditional political ideology. First, how could the king acknowledge the superiority of the French colonial authorities? In terms of the political ideology on which his own authority was based, he could not. The French appropriated to themselves rights which were basic to the king's authority: the right to raise taxation and to recruit corvée labour; and most significantly perhaps, they made all civil servants swear an oath of loyalty to the French President, which was modelled precisely on the oath which the mandarins traditionally swore to the king. It was a very different matter from sending tribute every three years to the Emperors of China or Annam. They had left the king with total control over his own people.

The complexity, or inconsistency, of the political ideology with which the French sought to justify their rule is betrayed by the difficulties they had in finding appropriate vocabulary to describe it. Was Laos a colony, a protectorate, or bits of both? The effect of their presence on the way in which the people of the country, whether mandarin or peasant, regarded the monarchy, was bound to be dramatic.

Inevitably the kings themselves were influenced by the French. They went to study at French universities. They obtained new ideas as to the role of a monarch in a modern state. They saw the principles on which their rule had rested for hundreds of years decried as undemocratic and unjust. They abolished the more demeaning customs required of their subjects such as prostrating oneself when the king passed. So the people began to discover that the king was not the god they had taken him for. Even in Luang Prabang, where he retained his administration, he could be observed to have surrendered much of his power and mystique. In the rest of the country there was no longer a king.

If the French had difficulty in defining the exact nature of their legitimacy in Laos, they did not have the same problems with organisation. My own interpretation of why this was so, is that Laos did not actually need to be governed. A subsistence economy, autonomous village units, established relations between the different ethnic groups, a virtually defunct educational system (religious-based), and a Buddhist clergy in decline, had no obvious need for a strong central administration. The traditional mandarinate and aristocracy supported itself by the control of the trade routes. Those 'urban' settlements which existed, while nominally administrative centres controlled by a Chao Muong, were in fact markets, from the organisation of which this official obtained his not very luxurious livelihood.

The French, on the whole, left well alone. While the profits obtained from the territory were minimal, the expenses involved in running it were also small, and it was a useful buffer against British expansion. But in the climate of the early twentieth century the French could not leave it totally alone. They imported Vietnamese to fill the middle ranks of the civil service, presumably because they could not imagine a country without a government. Laos was after all

part of Indo-China, and gradually it acquired ministerial departments to deal with the different aspects of its affairs. Schools, a medical service, a transport system, a judiciary, a budget and a treasury were set up. Taxation had to be raised to pay for these services, and corveé labour drafted to carry out public works.

The French did not embark on any of these programmes with any great vigour. By 1959, five years after independence, and when expansion of the educational system was already under way, there were only 84,000 primary school pupils in the whole country, and just 2,400 pupils in secondary schools. By 1957 there were about 1,200 miles of surfaced roads and no railways (there are still none). The French often employed Vietnamese civil servants as tax collectors. The Vietnamese collected from the Lao, but the Lao were often able to persuade gullible minority hill people to pay their share for them. No active resistance to colonial rule by the Lao themselves is recorded, although passive resistance to participation in corvée labour or even working for a cash wage earned the Lao an unjustified reputation for laziness. The imposition of an administrative infrastructure was tolerated, but did not lead to any rush into the new towns, and French plantation owners imported Vietnamese or Chinese from Saigon as labourers.

Nevertheless, however the peasant might ignore these gradual changes, the balance had been upset. Rather as the relationship of the Chinese landlord with his peasant tenant had been disrupted in the early twentieth century by the growth of warlordism, so the relationship between Lao mandarin and Lao peasant, and between the Lao peasant and the minority hill tribesman was upset by French colonial intervention. The hill tribespeople found themselves being made to undertake the

menial tasks which the masters wanted done. In other cases French administrators established direct contact with minority leaders, by-passing the Lao intermediaries, and thereby helped to create within these groups a sense of separate political identity which was to have far-reaching consequences. In addition, Christian missionaries who had had scant success among the Buddhist Lao found more receptive ears among the minority groups and promoted education in indigenous languages and in French, often omitting any teaching of Lao.

The defeat of the French at the hands of the Japanese in the Second World War demystified the power of the French in the eyes of the small emerging elite which had had the benefit of a French education, but their foreign education nevertheless determined the way in which they would seek to run the country when given the chance.

The independent kingdom of Laos

The administration set in place at independence in 1954 was a logical development of the colonial organisation which preceded it. The king reigned as a constitutional monarch (a Constitution had been granted in 1947) and was assisted by a King's Council. Executive power was in the hands of a Prime Minister and a Cabinet of Ministers, who were not normally, however, members of the National Assembly, itself a legislative body elected by universal adult suffrage. The country was divided into 16 provinces, each with a governor who reported to the Minister of the Interior. Each province was divided into districts, each also with its governor. Provincial and district governors were appointed from above, but the village headmen and sub-district chiefs (Tasseng) were elected from below. Ministers, depending on the nature and importance of their departments, might have

agents and sub-offices at provincial and district, even sub-district, level. Thus the Ministry of Finance had an office in each provincial capital, the Public Works department had a unit in most individual districts, and of course health and education theoretically reached every village.

Political organisation clearly attained, with independence, a complexity quite unknown previously in the country. What was then the justification, the ideological back-up, to the introduction of this new series of hierarchical systems?

In formal terms the king survived as a constitutional monarch, but there was inevitable confusion as to the source of his legitimacy. His kingdom had been extended to cover the whole country by the voluntary retreat of the French and by the renunciation of claims to the southern princedom of Champassak by the scion of its house, Prince Boun Oum. At the same time the king renounced his claims to executive power, which he handed over to a Prime Minister, Ministers and an elected National Assembly. The legitimacy of the National Assembly deputies depended, theoretically, on 'the will of the people', the Ministers depended on the king for their appointment and on the National Assembly for their continuing authority.

Although this organisation was founded on the principles of western parliamentary democracy, the rituals of traditional kingship were maintained as far as possible.

Given the dramatic change which had taken place, however, from an ideology of divine kingship to one of a democratic constitutional monarchy, the rituals of royal legitimacy lost their direct relevance to political authority and acquired the sort of pleasant ceremonial connotations well known to the British people. The ideology expressed

in ritual no longer reflected even the ideal relationship between the king and his urban subjects. The relationship which modern political organisation theoretically reflected was one with which people were quite unfamiliar. Despite the holding of regular elections, the idea that a government official obtained the legitimacy of his position from the people's choice at the ballot box was not understood by the majority of the population.

Modern political organisation in rural areas

In the rural villager's eyes these various departments and officials of the modern administration could be lumped together as 'the government'. Their legitimacy was established not by concepts of political ideology, but by a more basic idea: the ability of officials to manipulate desired or feared resources. Essentially the military officer, the policeman, the civil servant, the politician, the judge or the professional technician were identical to the villager in that they controlled resources which were either desirable and 'good to obtain' or undesirable and therefore needing to be prevented. The member of parliament was not someone for whom you voted so that he would represent your political interests at some higher level, so much as an outsider whom you supported in exchange for specific economic benefits, some of which would be accorded as an incentive to vote for him, others as a reward for having done so. The relationship with officialdom in general was thus primarily economic.

Once again, though, the impact of modern political organisation on specific villages varied greatly during the period following independence, as the general political situation fluctuated and developed. Western governmental aid projects in a few villages encouraged the implantation of government services and repeated ministerial inspection

trips. In slightly less accessible villages the headman's occasional participation in sub-district meetings might be the only official contact with the administration for long periods of time.

Modern political organisation and ideology in towns

The impact of modern political organisation is, however, far greater in the towns, and the penetration of concepts of political ideology is almost exclusively urban. There are a number of reasons for this.

First, officials of the administration are predominantly resident in towns, specifically the capital, Vientiane, and their offices are located there. Secondly, a considerable proportion of ethnic Lao urban adults are employed as officials of the administration. Thirdly, modern education, available predominantly in town, has imparted an understanding of political organisation and ideology, and fourthly officials of the administration were for much of the period reluctant to venture far out of the towns owing to military insecurity.

In fact, as can be deduced from my description of the economic background in the previous chapter, modern political organisation was largely irrelevant to a subsistence rural economy. Villages had always provided their own police, judiciary and commercial services. The government did not raise taxation in the rural areas, and there were no supplies of water, sewage or electricity. Only through the services which slowly began to infiltrate rural areas, such as health and education, did villages begin to make contact with some elements of political organisation. In the majority of villages the only government-appointed resident, if there was one at all, was the primary school teacher.

The urban dweller, confronted as he is every day by the reality of an organisation above that of the village level, acquires a familiarity with organisational procedures. He visits the hospital, obtains a licence for his motorbike or registers a complaint with the police with no particular problems. The villager from outside town invariably goes directly to the house of a friend or relative living in Vientiane and uses a member of the urban family as his guide around the administrative complexities. This acceptance of a national political system by the urban dweller is aided by his participation in ritual communications partaking of this system and by his knowledge of the myths relating to them. For instance, although each village unit in the town has its own Buddhist temple, as in rural areas, some of these temples take on national or urban connotations. The temple of Wat Ong Tu in Vientiane, for example, is the place where officials gather to pay allegiance to the king. The temple at That Luang annually unites monks from throughout the town who receive alms from the king, and from the population of the city as a whole.

The concept of kingship obtains its mystical authority from the sacred power present in the capital city's central temple or in the king's palace. The town is the expression of the king's authority. The urbanite feels himself to be part of the same single administrative unit as all his fellow townspeople. Both spatially and politically the basic unit of which he feels himself a member is the city, with all that that implies in terms of ideology and participation. The rural dweller is above all a member of the political unit which is the village. His conception of anything wider is sketchy.

An illustration of the way this basic distinction is translated into thought and speech is in the reaction of rural and urban dwellers to the question bān chao yū sai? - 'Where is your village/house?' A

Lao urban dweller interrogated away from his home town will answer invariably with the name of that town, Vientiane, Savannakhet, etc. A rural dweller will either answer with the name of his village, usually a common name which could be in any province or district, or with a vague 'over there' or 'very far away'. It is extremely difficult to elicit the name of the province or district, and many people simply do not know them.

The buffalo sacrifice in Ban Phon Sung as an expression of political ideology[1]

The ceremony of *līang phī bān* - 'feeding the village spirit' - takes place in Ban Phon Sung every year on a Thursday in the sixth month (corresponding to late April/early May). The animal to be sacrificed is decided according to a three year cycle, chicken, pig, buffalo. Only for the buffalo sacrifice does the ceremony attract the participation of the whole village. I was fortunate that 1974 was the year for a buffalo. Its death was the centre of a remarkable occasion.

When asked why the ceremony had to be on a Thursday, the *nai bān* answered that it always had been, but there was a saying which might account for it:

phut dai bai	Wednesday gives leaves
phahat dai māk	Thursday gives grain

Work in the rice-fields was therefore always begun on a Thursday

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1. cf. Lévy (1943) which describes a buffalo sacrifice in Vientiane for the *phī mū'ang*, and Condominas (1975) which discusses the significance of *līang phī bān* in detail.

as well.[1]

For the villagers then the sacrifice to the phī bān was directly related to their hopes for a successful harvest. May is the beginning of the agricultural season. The rain should be beginning to fall and water the paddies.

On Thursday, 16 May 1974, it was not raining. It was tremendously hot. Nobody seemed in a hurry to start the ceremony before the heat of the day. Indeed when I walked across the half mile of paddy fields which separated the village from the hǭ phī (the spirit house) at about 9.30 a.m., I was among the very first to arrive.

The hǭ phī was sited in a little clearing on the edge of the forest to the west of the village.[2] The hǭ was a simple small wooden replica of an ordinary house, but without walls. It had recently been rebuilt and endowed with a corrugated iron roof.

The days events at the site lasted from 9 a.m., when the hǭ phī guardian and cult celebrant, the mǭ cham, arrived with members of his family to begin preparations, until almost sundown. There were long periods of waiting until the next part of the proceedings was prepared, but the principal activities, in chronological order, can be summarised as follows:

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1. The headman mentioned in passing that in Ban Phon Sung they performed the ceremony of sūkhuan khao - 'calling the soul of the rice' - on a Tuesday and not a Thursday. This was because of the following story. A certain Mr Khamphaphinoy asked the Phanyā - lords - on which day he should perform the ceremony. Since they hated him, they said Tuesday, which is the day of fire. They hoped his home and granary would be burnt down. In fact he was very successful and nothing went wrong, so the villagers copied his example.

2. Ceremonies to do with the spirit world seemed to take place in this marginal strip of land between rice-fields and forest. A cremation I witnessed later took place on an exactly similar site, but several hundred yards further north.

1. Initial offerings and invocations - The mǭ cham was a young man whose father had been the previous incumbent of the office. The father had died recently without teaching his son the ritual formulas. His mother therefore knelt beside her son and prompted him, telling him what to do and for the most part reciting the words herself. At this stage they simply informed the phī bān that the ceremony was about to take place and invited him to take part.

2. The slaughter of the buffalo - The buffalo had been tied to a tree nearby, and at about midday, without any order being given by the mǭ cham, three men took it about 50 yards into the forest and slaughtered it. The animal was cut into its main constituent parts there and then and brought back to the site just in front of the hǭ.

3. The offering of the sacrifice - The meat from the animal was divided between the part (small) which was to be prepared at once, offered to the phī and then consumed on the spot by the participants, and the part (large) to be divided between every family in the village and taken home. Once the food was prepared, the trays were lined up in front of the hǭ and the mǭ cham invited the phī bān to come and consume the food. Spirits consume by smelling, so fortunately the villagers can themselves sit down and eat the food once a short interval has elapsed.

4. The division of the meat - A flat area had been prepared near the hǭ. There the headman had organised the placing of 108 bamboo stakes carefully laid out in eight lines, each stake equidistant from the other. By each stake was placed a sort of tray of banana leaves. The men who had been cutting up the main part of the beast during the preparation and eating of the meal then walked round placing 1/108th part of each section of the animal by each stake. Obviously precision was impossible, but they tried to make sure that each stake got a fair

share of each part of the beast. The only parts that were not divided were the head, which went to the mǭ cham, a joint from one of the legs which was reserved for the slaughterer, and of course the parts which had already been eaten. When the division was complete, the village headman read out the names of those who had contributed, and a member of their family walked out and collected what lay by the next stake in the line, so that nobody knew in advance which family was to get which portion.

5. Ceremony for the mǭ cham - Later in the evening a few villagers went to the mǭ cham's and offered him a sūkhuan, to ensure the safe return of his souls after the exertions of the day's work in the spirit world.

Notes

1. The whole thing had been organised personally by the nai bān. He had collected contributions of 1,000 kip from each family. In fact a few, mostly widows, gave only 500 kip and were entitled to half a portion. In other households a father and his married child had sometimes contributed 1,000 kip each. The nai bān said that every household (90) had contributed at least 500 kip. Since his total came to 107,500 kip, I put in 500 kip at the last moment to make it up to a whole number of units, and each part of the animal could then be divided by 12 and then by 9.

2. The village is off-limits to outsiders during the ceremony. This is signalled by putting up a tālāeo, a distinctive sort of cross of matted bamboo, at each of the entrances to the village. In the past, villagers explained the talēo remained up for three days and nights and nobody could enter or leave the village while they were up. Now you could not do that. People had businesses, and the administration complained, so they just put them up for the duration of the ceremony -

dawn to dusk on the day itself.

3. The ceremony did not start at a given time, and when the first rites began there were only about a dozen people present. Gradually the attendance grew, throughout the day, until I estimated about half to two-thirds of the village population was there for the meal and the division of the spoils. Mothers with very young children did not attend, and each household left at least one person at home.

4. Many adults ate practically nothing of the meal, and it seemed to be a good opportunity for the older children to enjoy some meat.

5. The ceremonial did not take place in an atmosphere of particular reverence or awe, nor did any of it command the attention of all those present. Very few were present for the early offerings; when the meal was being offered to the phī bān the chopping up of the animal continued uninterrupted ten yards away; and when the buffalo was taken off into the forest to be slaughtered, I almost missed it, since three men just suddenly walked off and started work.

Analysis

At an overt level the līang phī bān ceremony is performed to ensure the success of the forthcoming agricultural season, and in a more general way to obtain the assistance and support of the phī bān for the coming year.

At a less overt level it can be seen as an affirmation of community identity. It is the only activity during the whole year, and indeed it happens with this intensity only once every three years, from which outsiders are specifically excluded and in which every village family feels obliged to take part. Apart from the nai bān, who is the organiser, and the mǭ cham, the ritual officiant, the ceremony makes no distinction between rich and poor, superior and

inferior. Each family contributes an equal share and extracts an equal dividend. It is also probably the only occasion on which so many members of the village sit down and eat together.

For the nai bān the ceremony was clearly of considerable importance. The contributions to the purchase of the buffalo had been meticulously noted to avoid dispute. The division into 108 portions was done anonymously and with as much precision as possible, and when everything was ready the nai bān stood on a small conveniently placed hillock and read out the list of names. Each person had to be content with the portion next in the line. Those who had subscribed for half portions divided one portion between themselves. The whole ceremony passed off harmoniously, without incident and in general good humour. This clearly reflected well on the nai bān.

I have already given my interpretation of the political ideology of rural villages like Ban Phon Sung. This ritual, and the ideology behind it, seem to me to be an illustration and reaffirmation of the relationship between the people, the nai bān and the phī bān, representing the founder of the village, and his successful containment of the natural forces which he had to master.

Condominas, in his analysis of the phī bān cults, considers them as one pole of a village religious system of which Buddhism is the other.[1] He rightly points out that writers have tended to minimise the importance of the phī bān, partly because the Buddhist temple and

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1. Condominas (1975) gives more importance than I would to the role of the mǭ cham (chao cham), at the expense of the nai bān. At the level of spiritual mediation, this is probably right, though the mǭ cham did not seem to me to have a significant political role.

Buddhist observances are so much more obviously part of the villagers' daily lives. He sees the opposition in terms of the functions of the two institutions.

> "The vat, an expression of the adopted great tradition, answers the needs of the people as members of a spiritual community, and it is the place of assembly for the group as a social and political entity. The jurisdiction of the hǭ phī bān, on the other hand, is not the community as a social entity but rather the natural ecological system that nurtures its members, above all the land which provides food, shelter and clothing".[1]

I think we can perhaps go further than this, and agree with Doré that the ceremony of līang phī bān represents a kind of payment made to the founder/owner of the village in return for his protection. It is therefore an image of traditional authority which demands service in return for protection and the provision of sustenance.[2]

Buddhism, as an ideology, may be imposed at the level of personal behaviour, or at the level of participation in a national cultural system. Doré sees Buddhism as providing peasants with an introduction to the aristocratic behaviour of the towns.[3] In a sense, of course, this is true. How far Buddhism succeeds in giving villagers a sense of their participation in a wider political entity, however, will depend on the ability of national political forces to impose themselves in the village context.

Political organisation in Ban Phon Sung

Besides providing a link between the villagers and the spirits of the locality, the nai bān of Ban Phon Sung also provided an organis-

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1. Ibid., pp. 272-3.
2. Doré (1972a) p. 16.
3. Ibid., p. 3.

ational link between them and the outside world.

Lung (elder uncle) Phay was in his late 30s and had already been nai bān for three years. Not particularly outgoing in character, he was still too young to be counted among the real decision-makers of the village. He was literate though, having attended four years of primary school, and was a conscientious administrator and organiser. He transmitted the contents of official circulars to the people by calling meetings of household heads, and he kept the list of village families up to date with the help of two samian (clerks). He signed forms attesting identity when necessary, received occasional official visitors and went to attend meetings of the Tasseng (sub-district) when summoned. For all this he received the salary of 7,200 kip per year (sic) (approximately US$5). Other villagers helped him, however, with his transplanting and harvesting without expecting any return. It was a thankless task, made the more difficult in the political climate of the time by the feeling that the nai bān could very easily incur the wrath of any of the numerous political elements competing for power by force of arms.

The real men of influence in the village were older than Lung Phay, though they were mostly related to him. A close relative of his wife had been Tasseng chief for over 10 years until his recent retirement and was one of the best known personalities of the region. His advice was frequently sought on all questions, but particularly on any points of land ownership rights and the extent of each family's fields. He had had enough of the problems of everyday administration, however, and often declined to attend village meetings, sending his son instead.

Lung Phoun was the bus owner, and a man of such consequence

economically that his influence in decision-making was often decisive. If it was planned that Ban Phon Sung should offer a Kathin[1] religious ceremony in another village, the prerequisite was that Lung Phoun should offer to take people in his bus. If a festival was to be arranged in the village, Lung Phoun must agree to bring in the amplifiers, loudspeakers, beer and soft drinks from Vientiane.

Other influential men in the village included one of the sālavat, a lay official charged with looking after the vat and its monks. He had spent many years in the vat himself, and was a fund of appropriate epigrams and uplifting examples.

There did not seem to be any direct correlation, however, between any single social or economic characteristic and political influence. Several wealthy merchants took no part in the political affairs of the village; nor did a number of the Buddhist-educated elders. Involvement in village affairs was first of all by choice and force of personality. The kind of personality which was attracted towards leadership seemed also to be the sort most likely to seek economic wealth.

I have described earlier in the chapter the organisational role of the nai bān as I imagine it to have been in traditional times and noted some of the ways in which it has changed during the processes of modernisation. It will be interesting to examine some of the specific effects of modernisation in the village of Ban Phon Sung.

With the introduction of western theories of administration, Ban Phon Sung of course became a unit in a single national administrative complex. The headman became a salaried official of the government

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1. The Kathin ceremony involves providing new robes for the monks.

whose election had to be ratified by higher authority. The new administration had imposed a new ideology on the nai bān which made him the representative of the 'government' in the village, where traditionally he had always been village representative to the outside world. The basic incompatibility of the role seems the reason why many villagers refused to stand for election and why a man who was in no sense the leading personality of the village should have been put forward. A conflict in political ideologies meant that, rather like the king in the new constitutional democracy, the nai bān continued to perform the ritual duties of the office, but ceased to exercise the real power with which the position had once been invested.

Furthermore, the headman of Ban Phon Sung received official government visitors in his house, but unofficial visitors, often of more political consequence, were received by the more influential elders in their houses.

While I was in Ban Phon Sung, a directive was received by the nai bān announcing the visit of the Director of the Department of Animal Husbandry, together with the Chief of the Provincial Veterinary Service and a number of officials including the Deputy District Governor. The nai bān took the opportunity of a sūkhuan ceremony the previous evening to announce the visit to those who were there. The visitors would have to be fed, housed and entertained. They were coming, according to the directive, to "propagandise and explain the methods for practising agriculture and raising animals". The immediate reaction of one old man was, "What does this Director think he can teach people who have practised this way of life for generations?" "Well", said the nai bān, "we had better do what we can. It only happens once every four or five years".

Having bullied a few of those present into agreeing to turn up and bring some fish or a chicken, the nai bān turned the conversation to the division of fishing rights in the coming season. This took place with much laughing and smiling, but was obviously a matter of considerable delicacy. At a ceremony convened to celebrate the recovery of a man from illness, the ground had thus been laid for a number of important village political decisions. The nai bān had simply made sure that the host for the ceremony had invited the main political figures in the village.

The next evening the Animal Husbandry officials arrived, and were directed to the house of the nai bān. He immediately sent out boys to invite the men he wanted to be present and some girls to come and cook. I went over almost at once, and found that no villagers had yet arrived. Despite repeated attempts by the nai bān to increase the attendance, there were never more than a dozen local men present. The visiting officials, with one exception, chatted among themselves, and made no attempt to engage the farmers in conversation.

The films they were to show could not start until the meal was over, since the generator was needed to light the nai bān's house for his guests. At 9.30, then, when eventually the films began, many people had given up and gone home to bed. There were three films. The first was about life in an Australian city. The second was about raising cattle in Australia. The huge milk-producing cows attracted admiration, and I was asked by a couple of old men how the Australians got their grass so lush. I explained that their climate was different, and it rained on and off all the year round. Really?

After the second film the Director made a speech. Even though he spoke through a microphone, he read it out in such a low monotone

that nobody listened and a buzz of conversation developed. Nobody afterwards had any idea what he had said. The third film was a Thai traditional folk theatre drama, and those who had managed to keep awake until midnight when it began were duly rewarded. The visiting officials were even taken on afterwards and given duck and rice soup at the house of one of the unmarried girls who had helped cook the meal.

If the villagers suffered such very rare official visits in good part, there were other government services of which they recognised the value and for which they campaigned actively. The principal of these were education, health and roads.

At the time of my stay the village school taught only the first three years of primary school in makeshift accommodation. For the following three years of primary school the children had to walk $1\frac{1}{2}$ miles to the next village. Ban Phon Sung was therefore collecting funds to build a new school. Every festival donated its profits to the cause, but if the large quantities of cement, roofing sheets, glass and wood appropriate for the school of a proud village were to be obtained, some really substantial donations were needed. One such gift came from a police general with political ambitions who was assiduously cultivated by the retired Tasseng chief. Other leading village figures invited their wealthy town connections to the festivals and entertained them for lunch and a fishing expedition at weekends. These were ways of retaining goodwill for the village in important political circles and also of promoting projects such as the school building.

There was no government health worker in the village, and although a fine new dispensary building was nearing completion next to the

Tasseng primary school in the next village, there was still no sign of a nurse to staff it.

The project which seemed to be nearest the hearts of village leaders while I was there was that of improving the access road leading to the village from the main road $1\frac{1}{2}$ miles away. The road had been built up several years previously on a sort of dike between the paddy fields, but in places it was sinking and along most of its length it was so sandy in the dry season that huge palls of dust would float across the fields every time a vehicle passed along it. Worse, however, was the mud of the rainy season, and this sometimes made it impassable, which meant leaving the bus on the main road and operating it from there.

I was constantly asked whether I could not do something about the road. Surely I knew some American official who could come and fix it. They had tried every channel to get the Public Works Department on to it, but every time the answer had been bǭ mī ngoen - 'there isn't any money'. The official bureaucratic channel for such requests was through the following officials: nai bān - Tasseng - district governor - provincial governor - minister of interior - minister of transport (who approved or not the recommendation of the minister of the interior) - provincial public works chief - district public works unit. There were various potential ways of bypassing some of the links in this chain: one might enlist the help of a candidate for parliament who had connections with the minister of transport; one might invite the provincial public works chief to a festival and give him a great time, or, and this was the advice provided by my contacts in the Public Works department, one could get in touch directly with the district Public Works unit, offer to pay for the petrol required for the job and feed them well, and get them to do it in their free time over the weekend.

In the end even this did not work, since the district Public Works unit was unfortunately responsible for a long stretch of the Vientiane to Luang Prabang road which was constantly in need of repair. Since this was a prestige road, they were inevitably under pressure from their superiors. Also the village was not in the end sufficiently united behind the need to carry out the repairs, to allow enough cash to be raised in the first place. Those who used or operated the bus or had frequent business outside the village were of course mainly the influential families. They could not hope, however, to carry the less mobile majority of the village population on such an issue. The answer was therefore to find a direct totally free solution (my hypothetical American friend) rather than use the village's earning power, as was possible for the school building project.

I should say something about the political influence of village school teachers. In Vientiane province there was one young, enthusiastic and apparently liberal national assembly member who had capitalised on his previous job as director of the national teacher training college to promote his parliamentary candidacy through his former pupils, now teachers in various village schools. He also tried to promote teachers' involvement in local small-scale self-help projects, and in this he had some limited success.

That he was successful in being elected in front of other wealthier candidates supported by major military or political influences was a tribute to his success in mobilising this new political force. The limits to his influence on economic development in the area were set by the relative youth of the teachers, and by the predilection of most of them for spending their spare time in activities designed for their personal enrichment or pleasure. The principle of rural development through resident teachers, though informal and developed through a

chain of personal influence, was not greatly different from that used by the Pathet Lao, when they sent out young cadres to live for years on end in villages, just being helpful and not in the first year or so making any reference to political ideology. The difference between the Pathet Lao's approach and the effort of one parliamentarian was in the formality of the organisation, the technical support it received and in the motivation with which the individual cadres had been inspired.

In Ban Phon Sung none of the resident teachers was regularly present at meetings of the village elders. They were all in their 20s and only one was actually a native of the village. They were not noted for their drive or wisdom. In other villages I visited, however, where the leadership was less experienced in its contacts with the national administration, and where the teachers were a little older and more outgoing, they clearly had an important influence in determining the village's reactions to modern political trends.

Both the police and military had networks of officers and men which reached down to the Tasseng level. Their influence on local events naturally varied depending on circumstances. In Ban Phon Sung, and one suspects in most other Lao villages, village leaders were at pains to keep the local military at arms length. The influence of the Pathet Lao in that region was such that it did not pay to be openly too friendly with Royal Lao Army (RLA) soldiers. At various times during the long civil war, and in a number of different parts of the country, the RLA armed a sort of civilian home guard, which was expected to patrol the villages at night. In the early days people were paid for doing this duty, and it introduced a number of families to the cash economy in the early 1960s.[1] Later, guard duty was described as

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1. Condominas (1962) p. 118.

a civic duty and was unpaid. When I was in Ban Phon Sung, a year after the cease-fire, the guard was no longer mounted.

Pressure on village leaders to provide young men for the army would often be severe. There were those who were happy to go, but when they were not, all the skills of the village leaders were needed to prevent them from being drafted.

In conclusion, national political organisation gradually increased its influence on villages like Ban Phon Sung in the years following independence, as communications improved and the bureaucracy expanded. In order to preserve the independence of the village, the headman was elected more as a link with the outside world than as a leader of the village itself. Decision-making was by informal consensus at village meetings, but normally followed negotiations between a few influential household heads. In the political uncertainty of those years the pre-dominant characteristic of village leadership policies was to steer clear of trouble. Since the village contained sympathisers of all political tendencies, this meant that few community projects could be relied on to attract universal support. There was therefore a feeling that the village administration should interfere as little as possible in people's lives.

Political ideology in Ban Savang

Ban Savang had not been founded as a single act of settlement. It had just grown, and eventually its growth had prompted a high-level decision to redraw village boundaries and announce the existence of Ban Savang as an administrative unit.

This left Ban Savang without an obvious community identity. The land on which the village stood was mostly the former rice-fields of

people who had not lived in the village itself. One man at least, however, felt a close personal involvement with one part of the village. He had been one of the first to build his house there, in 1949, and at that time he had farmed some of the land immediately alongside. Although he had since sold most of the land, which was now roughly one khum[1] he still felt himself to be in a basic relationship with the spirits of the locality. He used to wander around the khum in the middle of the night. When I asked him why, he said he felt responsible for the security of the people living there. Mostly they didn't care, they didn't even know that he took these precautions. After further questioning it was clear that he was as much concerned with the possible activities of malevolent phī as with those of human criminals. He felt himself in the position of village founder, whose relationship with the natural forces determined to a large extent the success of the settlement.

Although this old man was hua nā khum - ward leader - an official administrative role subordinate to the nai bān, it can hardly be said that he represented any genuine relationship between the villagers and wider political forces, since there was no ritual which affirmed his role, nor did the inhabitants on the whole think of him in that sense. There was therefore no ideological link. He simply saw himself in the role by analogy with other settlements. He did not seek to impose his views on others. Certainly in the rest of Ban Savang outside that particular khum he was more or less unknown.

Ban Savang had not been able to make up for its lack of political ideology by any fundamental community involvement with the vat. The vat was not the product of community effort, but of the generosity of

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1. A village sub-division, or 'ward'. There were seven khum in Ban Savang.

one very rich family, and although the nai bān spent a lot of time promoting it, many residents in fact went to neighbouring vats where they had a greater sense of participation.

If Ban Savang did not have an internal political identity like Ban Phon Sung, to what extent then did its inhabitants participate in a national or urban political ideology? The answer would seem to be that such participation depended primarily on length of residence in the town and also perhaps on socio-economic status. Unfortunately I have no statistics on how many people, and who, went annually to Vat That Luang to join the king in giving alms to the assembled monks of the city and the nation. My impression is that those who went were more likely to be those who had a car or motorcycle to take them there -a distance of about three miles - and those who had moved out of central Vientiane to live in Ban Savang, rather than those who had recently migrated from the provinces.

Those most likely to participate in other affirmations of national political unity were of course government officials and their families, civilian or military. I have described above the ceremony of the oath of loyalty to the king, and the ceremonies of bāsī which officials offered to their superiors when they acquired or left office, and annually at New Year.

Another ceremony which took place during the That Luang festival was the game of tī khī, which I have discussed in Chapter Three, and which has been extensively studied by Archaimbault. He has shown that the ideology behind the ritual has been adapted in different parts of the country to suit local circumstances or historical events. In Vientiane it would seem to imply a role reversal between the officials

and the people, since the people invariably win the game. Archaimbault suggests[1] that the people in this case represent the 'aborigines', and that their victory reaffirms their original ownership of the land, although their loss of the final 'goal' acknowledges their submission to the political order instituted by the officials.

Other examples of role reversal in Lao culture are primarily concerned with relations between the sexes. At New Year girls in Luang Prabang are free to throw water at men, tear their shirts off, and smear their faces with grease. The man's only possible retaliation is to throw water. However, the men get their revenge at Bun bang fai - the rocket festival - one month later, when they can march round in drunken groups throwing the most vulgar insults at the girls, activating cleverly carved wooden fornicating models in front of them and generally demystifying sex in the most public way.

Just as these days on which the 'normal' order is ritually overturned perversely serve to reinforce the established cultural patterns of the relationship between the sexes, so the game of tī khī can be viewed as a ritual reaffirmation of the power of the officials over the people, since the only occasion on which that superiority can (and indeed must) be overturned is one of disorganised drunken play, in every sense the reverse of the organised sober order which it is the duty of officials to maintain.

It is significant that the principal rituals of political ideology in Laos which have survived in each of the major cities are quite distinct. In Luang Prabang the ceremonies of the Lao New Year (April) are those which illustrate the relationship between king, monks, people and the city's original inhabitants, the Mon-Khmer speaking minority.

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1. Archaimbault (1973g).

In Vientiane all the significant rituals take place during the That Luang festival (November), and in the south the Prince of Champassak affirms his ritual relationship with his people at Wat Phou, just outside the town of Champassak in March.[1]

As I have already suggested, these rituals bind the populations of their various princely cities and the immediately surrounding rural areas. They do not concern the bulk of the rural dwelling people.

In the period after independence (1954) various governments tried to propagate the idea of a Lao national identity, and one of the ways they chose was to promote participation in the rituals of national political identity. Village headmen were flown up to Vientiane for the That Luang festival and took part in the oath-taking ceremony. The fair at That Luang lasted ten days, and the national radio encouraged people to come from all over the Vientiane Plain to see it. The New Year ceremonies at Luang Prabang were enlarged, embellished, mechanised and publicised. The various boat-race festivals, spread out over the later months of the year in Luang Prabang, Vientiane, Savannakhet and Pakse were endowed with cash prizes for the winners and entertainments were laid on in the evenings.

The problem of course was that these ceremonies were all basically urban and culturally specific to the Lao ethnic group, emphasising that unique mixture of monarchy, Buddhism, Brahmanism and spirit cult practice which had evolved, with regional variations, in the Lao city-states along the banks of the Mekong river. It was hardly surprising therefore that the effects of right-wing governments to promote a Lao national culture and sense of political ideology were not notably successful outside the confines of the ethnic Lao populations of the

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1. Archaimbault (1971).

main towns, nor that the Pathet Lao, whose support depended so considerably on the ethnic minorities of the rural areas, were hard at work developing a much more anonymous national culture and political structure, in which the urban and culturally specific features of the monarchy, Buddhism and their related rituals would give way to political ideals based on an international ideology and the mass participation rituals it has developed (May day in Moscow, etc.), and a national culture made up of neutralised elements of the main national ethnic groups.

In Ban Savang, therefore, the identification of individual families with the royalist national political ideology depended on their ethnic origin and their religion, and to some extent on their occupation and length of residence in the town. As we shall see, those who participated in the administration of the village were predominantly ethnic Lao, Buddhist, government officials who had been resident in Vientiane for many years. Their conception of appropriate political organisation was therefore associated with the ideas of national political ideology described above.

Political organisation in Ban Savang

The nai bān of Ban Savang, Thao Bounmy, was aged 45 in 1974, had been born in central Vientiane and had moved to his present home in Ban Savang ten years before. He had been able to accept nomination and election to the post because he had been successful in business and now derived most of his income from the rent he obtained from letting out houses. Being nai bān was not a full-time job, but he had had to reduce his business activities considerably.

As in Ban Phon Sung the nai bān had two samian to assist him, but

there was in addition, and these posts had only been in existence for about ten years, a whole village council made up of various categories of member:

7	hua nā khum	Ward leaders
4	thao kāe pacham bān	Village elders
4	thāo khun pacham bān	Village 'mandarins'
10	kammakān pacham bān	Village committee members.

The hua nā khum each had charge of one of the seven geographical sub-divisions (wards) of the village. The thao kāe pacham bān[1] were elderly men with a reputation for knowledge of the ritual formulas. The thāo khun pacham bān[2] comprised an army general, a police colonel, a magistrate and the Tasseng chief, who happened to live in Ban Savang. The kammakān pacham bān, village committee members, were respected household heads of families in the village.

The nai bān told me that the full committee usually met once every two or three months or at the specific request of a group of members. He found the meetings useful because they kept him in touch with what was going on. The hua nā khum were particularly useful to him as they could keep a close eye on their particular wards, and that took a considerable load off his mind.

What were the duties of the various members and what did they discuss at meetings? The nai bān and the samian were supposed to keep an up-to-date list of the people resident in the village, and the hua nā khum were to advise them of any new arrivals and tell the

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1. Thao kāe is a composite expression, each part meaning 'old', which has come to be used for 'boss' of a commercial enterprise - here it is used in the sense of 'wise old men'.

2. Khun means 'noble' or 'mandarin' and is more commonly used in Thai than in Lao. In Thai it is an honorific title used to address senior officials.

newcomers to register. In practice, as I have shown, this 'family register' - sammanō khǭp khua - was hopelessly inaccurate and no attempt was made to keep track of the transient population that came to rent accommodation for short periods.

The nai bān and the samian were also expected to provide a number of essential forms, particularly attestations, for the people in the village. Applications for ID cards, marriage certificates, birth certificates, attestations for job applications, business permits, vehicle licences, family allowances. Most of this paperwork was based on models introduced by the French.

The nai bān told me that the idea to have large village councils was really the Pathet Lao's. The council discussed anything that might seem relevant, the organisation of festivals in the vat, the repair of the main road running through the village, educational and medical facilities, or any incidence of crime or disorder. The power of the council to actually do anything was limited, however, since it had no funds. Its most positive activity was to enlist helpers to organise the various festivities which took place in the village vat. The council meetings were actually held in the vat, which provided the only focal point for the village community. I have already described the limitations of this particular vat in its efforts to become a genuine focal point. Inevitably, it drew almost exclusively ethnic Lao, Buddhist, well established residents, and even among that group there were many who patronised other vats.

It may well be asked why there should have been such an apparent preoccupation with creating a community identity in Ban Savang, where plainly this did not exist. I think it was mainly because this was one of the aspects of rural life most regretted by urban migrants. I

have quoted one of my neighbours who complained that the vat was not muan ('fun'). Clearly participation in religious festivals organised at the village level was supposed to be fun. The people most concerned by this appeared to be precisely those ethnic Lao middle-level civil servants that we find on the village council.

Indeed the composition of the village council very much reflected the limitations of any attempt to involve the whole village population in a 'community'. The thāo khun or 'mandarins' were wealthy officials, whose jobs on the whole kept them from participating in village events. Indeed I never saw the army general or the magistrate attend any function at the vat. Enclosed within the walls of their modern villas, they had little or no contact even with their immediate neighbours. They were useful, however, to the nai bān when he needed support in high places - permission from the municipal governor, for example, to hold a three-day festival in the grounds of the vat for Bun Phavēt in March every year. All the other members of the village council were male, middle-aged to old, ethnic Lao,[1] Buddhist and predominantly employed by the government.

Excluding the four village 'mandarins', who qualified for their posts by virtue of being senior civil servants, there were 24 members of the village council, chosen without having to satisfy any specific qualifications. Of these 24, 12 were covered by my sample survey and it may be interesting to see what sort of people they were. The 12 were the nai bān, one samian, one thao kāe, five hua nā khum and four kammakān.

They were all male married household heads of between 36 and 63 years old (average 43¾). They had lived in Ban Savang for between 3

1. There was one exception - the hua nā khum of the Tai Dam ward.

and 25 years (average 9½). Six had been born in the municipality of Vientiane, one in the Vientiane plain, and the other five in various provinces of southern Laos. All except one had attended primary school and four had attended secondary (average years in school - 6). Nine of the twelve had spent between 7 days and 10 years in the vat, averaging two years each. Ten of the 12 worked for government services, 4 civil servants, 3 policemen, one soldier, one teacher and the nai bān, and the other two were farmers. Economically there was a considerable range. The two wealthiest household heads in my sample were among the twelve, but the one man who had no education, a policeman (kammakān), had a low wealth score of 631. The average of the twelve was 1,731 - above the village average.

The following table provides a rough indication of how the 12 compared with the average head of household covered by my survey:

Table 25 Comparison of village council members with other household heads in Ban Savang

	Figures for 12 council members	For 56 other household heads	For all 68 household heads
Age	43.75 years	42.5	42.72
Percentage of males	100%	87.5	89.7
Percentage born in Vientiane city	50%	25	29.41
Average years of residence in Ban Savang	9.58 years	9.09	9.17
Percentage employed by government	83.3%	53.57	58.82
Average years in school	6	5.32	5.44
Percentage who have spent time in vat	75%	34.04	42.37
Average length of time in vat	2.1 years	2.33	2.25
Average wealth points score	1,731 points	1,448	1,503

This table would appear to show that whereas the council members are fairly representative of household heads in Ban Savang from the point of view of age, length of residence in Ban Savang and years spent in school, the council members are considerably more likely than other household heads to be male, born in the municipality of Vientiane, employees of the government and former Buddhist monks. They are not any wealthier than the others if one eliminates the village's richest man from consideration.

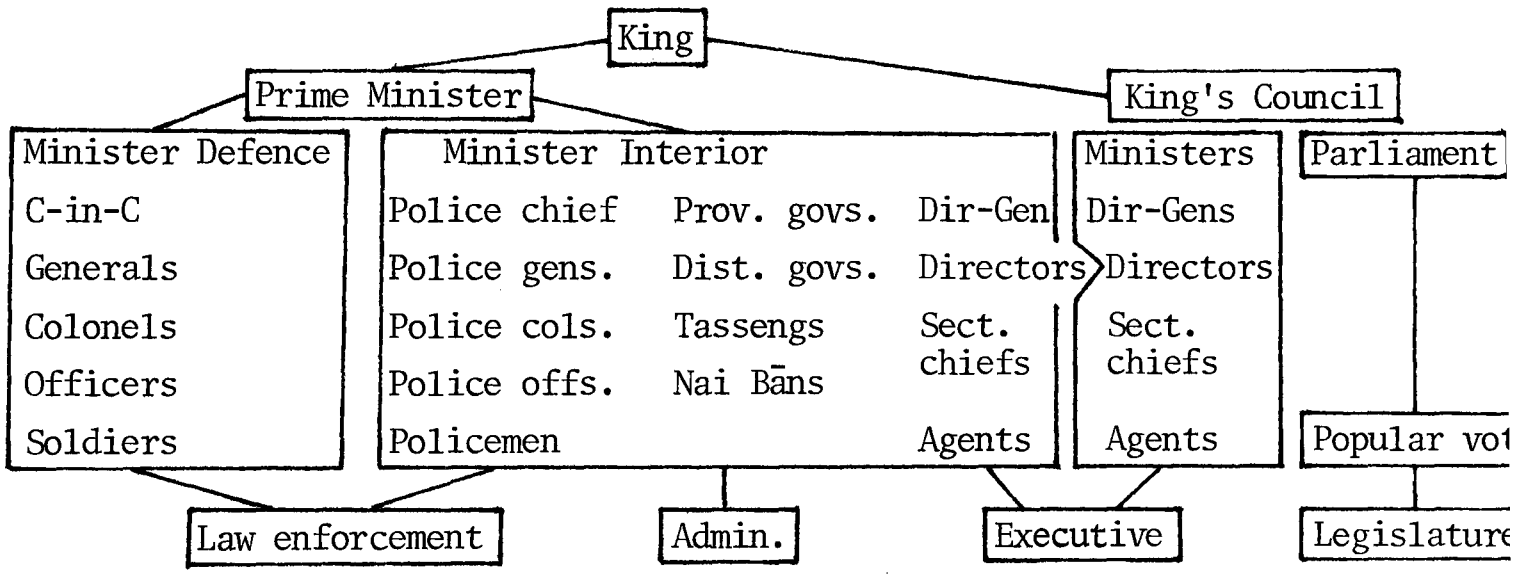
Although it would be wrong to place too much emphasis on such limited statistics, I think they can be said to bear out my analysis of Lao urban political organisation as the expression of a national political ideology based on the town, Buddhism and government service. By selecting for its village council men whose background reflects the inspiration of the national ideology, Ban Savang ensures that its political organisation bases its actions on the principles enunciated by that ideology.

I have shown that contrary to what would be true in Ban Phon Sung, the inhabitants of Ban Savang are inevitably more closely integrated into the national-urban political organisation. What precisely does this consist of? The city of Vientiane is a municipality having the status of a province. It has a governor called the chao khǭng khamphāeng nakhǭn. The city is divided into four districts (mū'ang), 14 sub-districts (tāsāeng) and 77 villages (bān). I shall refer to this hierarchy as 'the administration'. Then there is what may be called 'the executive', i.e. the various hierarchies from ministers - department heads - section chiefs - agents. In this case I include the judiciary, the health and the education systems as parts of the executive, since each has a minister and the various officials of the judiciary, the teachers, and the health workers are civil servants just

like those in other ministries. Alongside this system is 'the legislature', a parliament of 60 popularly elected members, and finally 'the law enforcem ent agencies' - the police and the military. All except the legislature are under the control of a prime minister, and the link by which the legislature is joined to the rest is by a King's Council, of which six members are members of the national assembly and six are appointed by the king.

The whole system can be summarised in the following table:-

Table 26 The structure of national administration



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Of the household heads of Ban Savang, nearly 60% have their place somewhere on this chart. Of the 40% of families whose head is not a government employee 43% nevertheless have at least one other member of the household who is. (76.5% of households include a government employee.) In Ban Phon Sung only the nai bān and two teachers are government-employed household heads (3.3%). There are two other teachers also resident who are not household heads (5.6% of households therefore contain one government employee - a high figure for a rural village.)

Of those Ban Savang households which do not have a direct participant in the political organisation, most are involved in commerce of one sort or another, and urban commerce is an activity inextricably bound up with government administration. Government authorisations are needed to set up a business, licences must be obtained to import goods or to open premises. Taxes have to be paid, profits declared, miscellaneous forms filled in. These aspects of bureaucracy, however, are crucial to how 'government' is viewed by the people who have to deal with it.

First, there is certainly little feeling for the indispensability of 'government' to an orderly way of life. "The Representatives (MPs) represent nobody but themselves" became a favourite axiom among young people. To obtain high government office was viewed as a desirable goal almost uniquely as a route to economic wealth and social prestige. Such ideas were perpetuated by the methods of recruitment, the factors which dictated promotion and the general way in which many services were run.

A policeman recalled for me how he had taken a police college entrance examination and had come 20th out of 1,400 candidates. In fact he had not known many of the answers, but he had a friend who was invigilating who was able to help him. Those candidates who had really important relatives did not have to take the examination at all. Indeed he could name several policemen who remained illiterate to this day.

Another government official described, with resignation, how the post to which one was appointed depended less on one's qualifications than on the positions already held by influential relatives who had the power of appointment. Even at a time when any technical expertise

was in short supply he knew of an electrical engineer in the Customs department, and a cartographer who had just been moved from the Geographical department to the National Library.

Finally, for much of the period urban residents understood, on the whole correctly, that the basic services were provided by money from the American and other western governments. If they had to pay for a service, such as the registration of a vehicle or the delivery of an ID card, they assumed that their money went to augment the salaries of officials. Merchants particularly considered that their important dealings were with 'officials' rather than with the 'government'. Every official piece of paper had to be bought from somebody, and the idea was to build up a relationship with one or more relevant officials who could provide the papers relatively cheaply. Even within the administration itself, people always contacted an official they knew in a particular ministry and asked him to have a word with the colleague who provided the particular service required.

To some extent, I suppose, the above features appear in most bureaucracies. What was perhaps exceptional was the degree to which the 'bureaucracy' was divorced in the minds of the people from 'the necessities of everyday life'. The money to fund its operations came from outside the country. It was built up primarily in response to the need to find jobs for people who had come into the town either to escape the war or to search for a job such as they had heard about. The government was the only major employer apart from USAID, which was in any case a sort of parallel government itself. Government employment was therefore, for the Lao ethnic group particularly, one of the most striking features of urban life. While emphasising this point, I am trying to suggest that this close proximity to, and involvement with, political organisation, did not necessarily impart into the minds

of the people of Ban Savang a profound understanding of the ideology which lay behind it. In reality, of course, the national political ideology, whose ritual illustrations I have already described, was becoming increasingly remote from the realities of a modern administration based on principles of western political thought and economic management. The official who pocketed 10% of the licence payments he received from restaurant proprietors did not relate that act to the grisly end and manifold misfortunes which he should expect if he broke his solemn oath of loyalty to the king. The two things were just simply not on the same plane.

The ceremonial of kingship, and even the modern ceremonial of constitutional democracy were, to the people of Ban Savang, more closely allied to their religion and to the distinctive culture of their ethnic group. Most aspects of the modern political organisation in which so many played an active part had been borrowed from French practice and were being financed by US government money.

In fact what had come about was that two political ideologies were competing on the same ground. Indeed, if one adds the ideology espoused by the Pathet Lao, the number rises to three.

In Vientiane in 1973 urban dwellers took part in ritual performances founded in an ideology of kingship which had little but ceremonial significance. It may be suggested that the British people have been doing the same thing for years. The difference would seem to be that the British people are by now well aware of the limited significance of the coronation ritual. The Lao were only beginning to understand the ideology, based on European democratic principles, which was being imposed through the new system of administration. The ritual performances in which the Lao took part were not only the annual rites, but

included the use of everyday gestures and particular vocabularies described earlier.

New organisational procedures were adopted only selectively. The system might be based on the principle of majority voting, but the Lao could only rarely be persuaded to make use of it. One Western institution typical of modern urban society, which was used according to traditional Lao principles, was the voluntary association. As we shall see, bringing together people of widely varying backgrounds and interests, and trying to organise them under principles adopted from village consensus politics, made these new institutions extremely difficult to operate.

Voluntary associations

Many writers about 'urbanisation' in Africa have paid particular attention to the role of voluntary associations in the processes of adaptation to social change.[1]

In Laos, by comparison with parts of West Africa at least, voluntary associations were poorly developed. There were, however, a variety of associations in existence which can be classified generally as either 'regional associations', 'mutual interest groups' or 'old boy societies'. By 'regional associations' I mean associations of urban migrants from the same town or province, where the name of that town or province appears in the association's name. 'Mutual interest groups' would include associations formed to promote particular activities such as sport, religion, welfare work, or cultural performances, and the 'old boy societies' grouped those people who had shared a common educational experience, though this might be as broadly defined as 'former students of French universities'.

1. e.g. Little (1965), West African Urbanization is subtitled A Study of Voluntary Associations in Social Change.

There were regional associations in Vientiane for each province, though they varied greatly in the range of activities which they undertook. There were also a number of associations representing important country towns which were not provincial capitals - places such as Vang Vieng and Keng Kok.

Examples of mutual interest groups were the Young Buddhists Association, the various football clubs, (many of them based in government ministries) and the international cultural associations, like the Lao-American Association or the Lao-British Club. Old boy societies existed for former students of the various colleges, but particularly for former students in the various countries to which people had been to study, especially of course France, where they maintained contact with the associations of current students there.

In 1973 I was present at the initial meetings which preceded the founding in Vientiane of a regional association for migrants from a particular provincial town, and it will be worth looking at this as an example of the problems encountered by the founders of such groups.

I was taken along to the house of an Air Force officer by a friend who was a teacher trained in America. There we met an engineer recently returned from training in Germany, the manager of a restaurant, an Army colonel, a captain and three lieutenants. All except the colonel were in their 30s and seemed to consider themselves as relatives (phī nōng). It later transpired that the colonel had not in fact been invited, but had heard of the meeting from somebody else.

After a meal of roast goat washed down with whisky the host made a short speech saying that they had convened to discuss the formation of an association (samākhom) of people from their home town. What they were particularly interested in were the problems of students from

their area who came to Vientiane to study, but had nobody to turn to in time of ill health or other difficulties. This was a preliminary meeting at which they might consider possible courses of action. He was grateful they had come, but sorry that some of their more senior colleagues (the director-general of a ministry and a medical doctor, for example) had not been able to make it. It transpired later that they had not been invited either. The host then asked the engineer from Germany to take charge of the meeting.

This man spoke quietly and was listened to with respect, and suggested the formation of a small group to be responsible for contacting important fellow-townsmen to obtain their views on the idea. This suggestion was opposed by others, who said there should be a provisional president, because in a group of equals nobody was finally responsible for seeing that the work got done. The colonel said he did not wish to be president, since he had little education, and it would be better if a younger, well-educated man were elected. He made this speech several times. Eventually the idea of a single provisional president, responsible for contacting important people and drafting a constitution, was shown to be more popular than that of a committee, and the choice was narrowed to the engineer from Germany or the teacher from America. Eventually the teacher was chosen, ostensibly because he was married and was in a better position to entertain guests. He was asked among other things to arrange a meeting in their home town the following month on the occasion of an annual festival for which people always tried to return home. It was agreed that the aims of the association would be: (1) To help students from the town who came to Vientiane. (2) To provide help to members in time of trouble. (3) To assist merchants from the town wishing to do business in Vientiane and possibly offer them a place to sleep. They

hoped to be able to use the Vientiane house of another army colonel, who had been posted to another town, as their office and possibly as a students' hostel.

The subsequent discussions that I had with various members of the group revealed elements which had not been clear at the meeting. The colonel who had so vigorously declared his wish not to be elected president, clearly had hoped to be elected provisional president, so that he could push the candidacy of his brother-in-law, the director-general of a ministry, as permanent president. This was considered to be an attempt to boost the brother-in-law's chances of election as a National Assembly member, since a candidate who was president of such a regional association stood a good chance in a parliamentary election. Thus, although the association was overtly intended as a welfare group, it was recognised that it had important political potential. Indeed I discovered that the town had no representative in the National Assembly at that moment, since the various factions had been so badly split that the candidates of neighbouring towns in the same multi-member constituency had been successful.

Secondly, it was agreed that no association could be formed without the support of the town's top civil servants and military men in Vientiane. At the most direct level they could block any application to the Ministry of the Interior for registration as an association, without which nothing could be done. However, although their support was essential, their active participation in the activities of the association would tend to politicise it, and it was a criticism one often heard of other regional associations - that they seemed to exist as a political constituency for their elite presidents, and that little of the money raised by their members, ostensibly for welfare activities, ever reached its intended destination. It was for this reason that the

group who were prompting the formation of this particular association had not invited the town's most important representatives to the preliminary meetings, and ignored the veiled request of the colonel to be selected as provisional president.

In the end the association had a short life, the national political events of 1974 and 1975 pushing its eventual success in obtaining government recognition into the background and scattering its leading members to different parts of the country and even abroad.

In fact all associations, of whatever kind, seem to have suffered from two major inhibitions, the fear that the president would use the group as a political platform, and the fear that the treasurer would embezzle the funds. It was probably these two considerations more than any others which contributed to the large number of associations which existed in name in Vientiane in the early 1970s, and the extremely small scale of their activities. The village political process of consensus decision-making was adopted, as in the meeting I had observed, with its corollary of withdrawal as the only means of objection, but the social milieu in which associations were grounded was not so compact or harmonious as the village. Where in the village the relative homogeneity of the community allowed consensus politics a fair chance of success, the basic conflicts of interest present in any urban association tended to encourage situations where no decision was taken and nothing was done, in order to avoid alienating a large part of the membership.

It may be that the frustrating experiences involved in the setting up of associations were partly due to teething troubles natural enough during the early days of rapid urban development, and that these would eventually have allowed such groups to have worked out more satisfactory

methods of operation. In the climate of the time the mistrust of politicking and of financial improprieties were sufficient to minimise the impact of associations on the lives of urban residents. Few urban residents spent much time participating in association activities, and many would voice their disillusion if asked about a particular association of which they had once been a member. The only groups which remained popular were the mutual interest groups which allowed people to practise their favourite sports and hobbies, or to further their studies. Thus, the various football clubs and bodies like the Lao-American Association, which offered English language lessons, flourished to the detriment of welfare or discussion groups. The services which in West Africa were provided by regional associations (such as funeral arrangements and sickness benefit) were in Vientiane still sought from within kin-based networks of informal mutual assistance, or from wealthy patrons, by those who had one.

Meanwhile the Pathet Lao, in their part of the country, were developing a form of society where state-controlled associations based on quite different criteria would begin to play a central role in the organisation of people's lives. These associations began to appear in Vientiane in 1975, and their characteristics are briefly described in Appendix 1.

CHAPTER SEVEN LIVING TOGETHER IN LAO VILLAGES AND TOWNS - PATTERNS OF RURAL AND URBAN SOCIAL RELATIONS

In this chapter my main aim is to show how, from the base of a 'traditional' way of life, social life has developed in modern Lao towns and villages under such varied influences as colonial and post-colonial intervention, modern economic patterns, modern technology, and elements of western culture. Inevitably I have had to omit large and important sectors of social life, preferring to concentrate on the detailed analysis of a few aspects rather than offer a wider but more superficial coverage. It is for this reason that there are no sections specifically devoted to the study of education, health or religion, although all are inevitably referred to in other sections. I have left out religion as it is the only feature of Lao social life that is adequately covered by other writers. Education and health are areas where a totally new system has been introduced piece-meal from outside and installed in place of, or alongside, an existing system. The relationship between the old and the new, and the influence of the new services on specific aspects of social life are fascinating areas of study, but I feel they reveal less of the processes of social adaptation and development than the study of the evolution of existing social patterns such as kinship and marriage. This chapter therefore contains a detailed analysis of social status, kinship, courtship practices and marriage. It concludes with an examination of certain types of deviant behaviour which showed great increases in the towns during the last 15 years of rapid modernisation.

In the analysis of these various aspects of Lao social life a number of points will recur, allowing some general conclusions on the way in which social relationships have developed in recent times. First,

the conceptual distinction between ideology, expectations and practice will be shown to be of great importance. I examine categorical statements about Lao society which will prove to be describing ideology, although they give the impression of talking about practice. Thus I shall present examples of actual behaviour, about which a Lao would say, "No Lao would ever do that".

Linked to this first point is the question of conflicting ideologies. It will become clear that modern Lao people frequently justify their behaviour by reference to a number of different, and sometimes conflicting, ideals. I shall try to gauge how far the acceptance of specific ideologies can be said to divide urban from rural dwellers and rich from poor.

I shall focus particularly on relations between individuals. In trying to isolate the way in which ideals conflict, and how they influence actual behaviour, the analysis of interpersonal relationships has seemed most fruitful. It will be seen that the first consideration in Lao society when entering a new relationship appears to be to establish an understanding of relative superiority and inferiority. However, one relationship may have many strands, and 'superiority' may be calculated on the basis of principles as diverse as age, sex, wealth, occupation and kin relationship. I shall try to show how conflicting social ideologies give prime importance to different factors, and how the desire for harmonious social relations may be frustrated as a result of such differences.

The Lao's stated and apparent wish to avoid interpersonal conflict would seem to derive from ideals present in the composite religion of popular Buddhism and spirit-cult beliefs. The ideal of harmony leads to a strong emphasis on appearance. It will be suggested that in Lao

terms an ideal can usually be considered fulfilled, if it can be made to appear that it has been. In this case, actual practice becomes relatively unimportant, provided that appearances can be maintained. I shall try to establish that this philosophy can lead to some extremely complex situations, particularly when one protagonist in a relationship may be basing his behaviour on the principles of a different ideology.

Finally, the economic and political background to the development of modern social relations, described in previous chapters, has been such that town and countryside, already quite distinct in traditional terms, have grown further apart under the selective impact of new external influences, although advances in physical communications have in some ways brought them closer together. Similarly, the opportunities for new types of wealth in the towns and villages would appear to have established new social barriers between rich and poor. The analysis of how traditional ideals have weathered the impact of ideas and practices imported from outside will focus particularly on the rural-urban distinction.

In deciding where to begin this discussion it seemed important to establish major social categories to which I could refer in the subsequent sections. I therefore begin with an analysis of 'status' and 'class'.

'Status' and 'class'

In discussing the ways in which people rank themselves and others within a society, we are faced with a number of problems of vocabulary. Words like 'class' and 'stratification' have been so variously defined, that it is often not clear what is meant.

In a recent thesis Mark Turner[1] successfully uses a basically Weberian vocabulary, as updated by Runciman,[2] to analyse inequality in a Philippine town. In these terms "stratification is about distinct social strata ranked in a vertical order".[3] The word 'class' is used to distinguish between strata established on an economic basis, and 'status' reflects the overt local interpretation of social inequality, in terms of prestige. Status is primarily about whether X is ranked socially higher or lower than Y, but in order to establish that status stratification exists in a society, one must be able to show that the combination of criteria by which status is measured can be brought together in such a way as to allow categorisation in distinct identifiable strata.

It should be clear from my introductory remarks to this chapter that what I am most concerned with is analysing the ways in which status is acquired and recognised. I am less concerned to discover whether Lao society can be divided into distinct class or status strata, than to see how inequality is created, perpetuated and granted legitimacy. As a result, and in view of the imprecise economic data with which I have been dealing, I have not attempted an analysis of Lao society according to economic classes. Indeed, the rather exceptional circumstances prevailing in modern Lao towns, whereby the wealthiest individuals cannot, in general, be said to be owners of the means of production, but have acquired their wealth through control of the distribution of foreign aid, seem to militate further against a class analysis. In addition, we have seen that there is no history of large-scale land ownership in Laos, and that the great majority of rural

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1. Turner (1977).
2. Runciman (1968).
3. Turner, op.cit., p. 46.

dwellers own and farm their own land.

For these reasons I have decided not to use 'class' at all in this thesis. This should not be taken to mean that I believe Laos to be 'a classless society', or indeed that a class analysis could not be attempted in a worthwhile way. I simply feel it would not be a helpful exercise in the context of this study.

Status, however, is clearly a matter of considerable significance in Lao society, although its precise definition depends on the ideology in terms of which it is being sought. In a society where notions of ideal behaviour and achievements may conflict, the measurement of status will also be open to debate, and may undergo quite rapid modifications. To take one example which will recur later, a woman aged 45 in Ban Phon Sung told me that when she was young, girls looked for husbands who had spent time as Buddhist monks, but that girls today all chased after men who had jobs in the city. Both sets of women hoped to obtain husbands with high status. Their analysis of what constituted high status had changed over time.

To begin this enquiry it seems worth looking at the major social divisions in traditional Lao society to see how far they corresponded to distinct status levels, and how far they retain significance today. The divisions were these:

1. Royalty - Those in direct line of descent from a king of Laos, up to six generations. Identified by the prefix chao before their names.

2. Functionaries - khārāsakān (servants of the king). This category naturally contains a wide range of status rankings, including all the non-royal officials of the kingdom. Ranks were identified by the function and by the use of honorific titles granted by the king (in

descending order) phanyā, phia, sāen, mōen, down to thāo, indicating a simple member of the mandarinate.

3. Buddhist monks - Members of the sangha. There are two major categories: phra or khū bā (full monk), and chua or nēn (novices). Identified by their saffron robes and shaven heads.

4. The people - rāsadǭn - the king's subjects, free men, of whom the great majority, if not the totality, were farmers.

5. Khā - 'slaves' or members of the ethnic minorities. Enslavement of ethnic Lao appears to have been rare, and could only result from debt.

Recruitment into the royalty is of course by birth. Recruitment into the civil service was by royal appointment. Inevitably, although there was no direct ideological justification for this, the civil service also tended to be self-perpetuating.

The sangha, or order of Buddhist monkhood, enjoys the highest status of all according to the traditional model. The only criteria for entry, however, are to be male, in good health and free from other obligations such as debt.

How easy was it to pass from one category into another? First, access for men into and out of the highest status category, the monkhood, was simply by choice - if one could find a sponsor. Secondly, although the royal family tries to remain endogamous, except when intermarrying with neighbouring royal families, it has never been large enough to make genuine endogamy feasible. Royal princes often have peasant mothers, although princesses who marry commoners do not pass on their royal title. Thirdly, one of Edmund Leach's best known pieces of work[1] was to show how

1. Leach (1964).

Kachin might 'become' Shan by adopting the style, language and behaviour of the Shan. In Laos, particularly in the area near Luang Prabang, a Khmu (Mon-Khmer speaking ethnic minority) might 'become' Lao most easily by going into the temple as a Buddhist monk. His title and achievements would then allow him to court a Lao woman and set up in a Lao community. Similarly, Khmu girls who came down to work as servants in Lao households might find husbands in the village, and their descendants be considered as Lao.

Although access from one group to another was by no means impossible, membership of a particular group provided a first indication of status levels. This was especially clear in the use of language. In the rural villages words for 'I' and 'you' are almost unused. One refers to another person by an appropriate kinship term, and to oneself by the corresponding term. Thus, when speaking to a woman 20 or 25 years older than myself I call her pā (senior aunt) and use lān (nephew) instead of 'I'. Only in cases of exceptional familiarity, as parents speaking to their children, or very close age-mates talking, is the pair kū (I) and mu'ng (you) used. This is so familiar that its use in any other context is highly insulting. In the village, if one wishes to call someone by their name, one uses the kinship term plus the name, as āi Boun ('elder brother Boun'), until they have children, and after that the teknonymous term, such as Phǭ Souk ('father of Souk') (see below for kinship terms).

The villager does, however, learn to address monks with particular terms of respect. He refers to himself as khanōi (literally: 'little slave', but equivalent to 'your servant') and uses the respectful thān for 'you'. The villager recognises monks as separate and superior to laymen, but the monk does not participate in the everyday social world. The layman recognises his spiritual authority, and in some cases perhaps

his political influence, but the monk's participation in economic affairs is simply as a consumer of what the layman is prepared to offer him for his simple daily needs. The monk has achieved his superior status by withdrawal from society.

The villager may extend the terminology with which he addresses a monk to use with visiting officials. As noted in the last chapter, they represent 'the government' (lathabān). Although the villager can, and does, distinguish in a general way between senior and junior officials, civilian and military, powerful and weak, they can all be categorised, like monks, as superior to, but outside, village society.

Within the village itself status, as indicated by language, was obtained therefore either from a kin relationship or from former service as a monk. Monks who left the vat were granted honorific titles depending on how far up the ranking system they had progressed. How far could status be obtained in other ways in traditional rural society, and what ways were available to measure it?

In terms of the religious ideology of popular Buddhism, the prime motivating force in society is that of bun or 'merit'. An individual acquires merit by good deeds, and this adds to his store of karma (kam), which determines the condition in which he will be reincarnated in his next existence. The best way of acquiring bun, apart from becoming a monk, which is the best of all and guarantees instant high status, is to devote oneself to good works in favour of the vat. In general terms the greater the outlay of material wealth, the more bun is obtained.

Bun is not only acquired by voluntary deeds, but also by what a Westerner might call good fortune. For example, to have a large number of healthy children is a sign of bun; to escape injury when involved in an accident, or to be loved by a beautiful girl; all these

would be considered indications of the presence of bun.

How far can bun be equated directly with status in traditional rural society? The answer would seem to be that they are close but not identical. Bun is after all basically spiritual merit. Status, even in traditional society, is based on wider criteria. It is here that the concept of piap, which I discussed when looking at Doré's work in Chapter Three, comes in. Piap can perhaps be most closely translated as 'prestige'. Significantly it is used most commonly in discussing the loss of prestige by one person to another. I discuss in later sections examples of serious loss of piap in personal relations. In order to regain it, a man must insist on compensation from the person responsible. In extreme situations, if a man loses piap, and repeated attempts to redress the balance meet with no response, he may feel forced to kill his opponent. Piap involves honour, 'face', the gaining and retaining of a position in society. In short to lose piap is to be threatened with a loss of status. To obtain piap at the expense of another is to raise one's status in comparison with his.

What are the principal criteria by which piap is measured? To gauge the criteria for traditional status one should presumably look at the social ideology of traditional society, and for this the text of advice and good wishes recited on the occasion of a marriage provides a good illustration. I have translated such a text below (p. 361), and it will be seen that the qualities singled out for most praise are Buddhist learning, wealth, beauty, and above all appropriate behaviour, including generosity, hard work, respect for one's superiors, and so on. The overall message is one of the need for harmony with nature and with society. It does not, however, seem possible to single out one quality or achievement, and say that it is more important than any other. There is a feeling of a need for completeness.

If retaining one's appropriate status in traditional rural society involved stability and gradual progress, status levels in the cities were likely to be far more volatile. The fluctuations of fortune to which the Lao kings were subjected inevitably called into question their ability to maintain the image of supreme status. An attack on the king's piap could not be allowed to go unchallenged. It was thus that Souligna Vongsa sacked the town of Xieng Khouang in 1651, when its prince refused to send him his daughter to Vientiane.[1] A classic example of when concern for piap caused a king to embark on the most foolhardy exploit was Chao Anou's attack on Bangkok in 1827. Chao Anou felt he had been insulted during a visit to the court of Rama III, and could think of no way to re-establish his piap other than to launch the biggest possible army against Siam.[2]

Fundamentally status is and was about the control of access to resources. The king, his ministers and all his officials enjoyed status in relation to the amount of their control over desirable assets. A court served by many captured prisoners, boasting wealth, beautiful buildings, and high standards of Buddhist learning attracted more people to it, and the greater the number of subordinates one had, the greater one's own status.

Essentially then the assessment of status as being concerned with the control of access to resources has not changed and cannot change. What changes is the nature of those desirable resources and the methods used to acquire them.

How have ideas of status developed in recent times, both in rural and urban areas? First, if we take the five major social divisions

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1. Le Boulanger (1931) p. 117.

2. Wyatt (1963).

noted above, it remains true[1] that Buddhist monks receive highest status at the level of language and gesture. Everybody, including the king, prostrates himself in front of a monk and uses particularly deferential terms of address, and we can say that in terms of Buddhist ideology, monks naturally continue to have the highest status in society. In terms of other ideologies, however, the monks' status may be called seriously into question. One may hear the monkhood referred to as parasitic. In Vientiane it was possible to hear it publicly suggested, by an American missionary at a church service attended by Lao, that "Buddhism is a fifth-rate religion".

Secondly, the king, and by association the royal family, inevitably lost status by the curtailment of their powers and the surrendering of their mystique. A peasant's son might find himself sitting on the same school bench as the king's nephew. The inability of the royal family to control access to resources and to maintain themselves apart from the population involves a loss of status to a degree where the separate social category of royalty may in some respects be merged into that of high government officials.

New ideologies have also brought in the abolition of slavery and the emancipation, theoretically at least, of the ethnic minorities. Some Lao clearly see this as a collective loss of piap for the Lao people as a whole. To allow people born into inferiority even potential access to high status was disturbing to the accepted order.

What then were the criteria of status which the new ideology sought to impose? Here again the question has no simple answer. An ideology is in the mind of the man who uses it. In the extremely confused

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1. This thesis does not attempt to assess change since 1975 (except in Appendix 1).

circumstances of the past 30 years of Lao history, the ideals held by Lao people of different ages and stations were infinitely varied. Some might imagine they had understood the status quests of their French teachers and wished to emulate them. Others might be influenced by ideas borrowed from the wealthy Chinese minority. When speaking about such things, however, any Lao, even if he had been educated in France and could hardly write his own language, would insist that he was a Lao and respected Lao values. This did not help much in analysing what those 'Lao values' were.

I have found it useful to identify one distinct status stratum in modern Lao urban society, which I call the 'elite'. This seems to correspond to a Lao conceptual division, as well as to an objectively identifiable group of people. Analysis of the 'elite', the criteria for membership and the means of obtaining it, should tell us something about modern ideas of status, since it is clear that the elite comprises those Lao with the highest status in modern society (excluding Buddhist monks from consideration for the moment).

In Lao terms the elite were chao nāi. In the rural areas this term might be used to designate any official from the capital, but in the town it referred to those officials who controlled access to wealth and status. There seems to have been a rather acute awareness of the point in the administrative hierarchy at which such control was enjoyed. In most cases it was at the rank of colonel in the military and director of a department in the civilian administration.[1] It might also include

1. At the end of 1973 there were 22,368 civil servants in the country, of whom 8,621 were teachers and 1,642 were medical staff. If we say, for the sake of argument, that one tenth of the civil servants could be considered members of the elite, and one twentieth of teachers and medical staff, then we have a figure of about 1,750. If we double it to take account of the military and commercial elite and reckon that each person has an average family of five, we arrive at a figure of 17,500. With a national urban population of 450,000 and a total population of 3 million, 4% of townspeople and 0.5% of the national population would be part of th elite. There was obviously a much larger number, who were on the fringes of the elite and hoped to move into it. Though considered as chao nāi by

the managing director of a commercial company, or a professional man such as a doctor, although in most cases doctors who would be considered members of the elite also had administrative functions, such as director of a hospital. Who reached such posts and how?

In fact the elite had an extremely diverse background. One part of course came from the royal families of Luang Prabang, Champassak and Xieng Khouang and the families of their senior officials. The Vientiane royal family had been completely eliminated by the Siamese in 1830. A number of elite families were historically connected with the office of Chao Mū'ang in various districts, but it is my impression that many others just happened to find themselves farming a piece of land that the French decided to turn into a provincial town. Vientiane held 1,000 people in 1900. Savannakhet and Pakse were entirely French creations. The people who lived nearby were the first to be recruited by the French, and in addition their land became valuable. They learnt French, sent their children to school when it became possible. They might be looked down on as upstarts by some ultra-royalists in Luang Prabang, who alone perhaps kept up the idea of social status being transmitted by dynastic inheritance, but the king conferred titles of phanyā (the top mandarin rank) on their members all the same, and they inaugurated their own dynasties based on wealth and political influence.

The diversity of background of the elite meant that although self-perpetuating, it was considerably fragmented. It was possible to identify all sorts of different groups whose enmity for one another was based in some cases on political differences, in others on regional rivalries and in others on the mistrust of aristocrats for uncouth up-starts. Yet they had in common membership of this identifiable group to which they tried to restrict access as far as possible from outside.

The first criterion for membership was clearly economic. A few relatives of the king lived in moderate circumstances in Luang Prabang, but they would only have been considered chao nāi by a limited group of local retainers. The elite were, in general, rich and had to remain so, in order to participate in the way of life expected of them. Secondly, the elite controlled access not only to wealth but to political influence, and this gives a hint as to the nature of their legitimacy. They exercised their power in the name of the king, and they were appointed by him. In terms of the traditional Lao ideology, regular ritual performances justified their control of resources. In terms of any new imported ideology, their position was justified by education, and theoretically by the confidence of the people who had elected the government to power.

Inevitably, as the imported ideology increased the stress on education as a qualification for government service, and 'knowledge' (khūam hū) was identified by even the poorest peasant as the one channel towards higher status available to his children, so the control of the existing elite over access to education became increasingly important. Their efforts to retain it led to predictable conflicts with aid-giving governments wishing to provide scholarships for foreign study on the basis of merit rather than on who the student's parents were.

The criteria for high status in terms of the new ideology seem then to be relatively straightforward - wealth, political influence and education, but a rather more subtle picture may be obtained by looking at the way relationships between superior and inferior were envisaged.

The word for 'subordinates' in Lao, either in a government department or a commercial enterprise, is lūk nǭng, a composite noun meaning 'children/younger siblings'. The implication would seem to be to

identify the relationship between political and economic superiors and their subordinates with that of parents and their children. This is borne out by the fact that the same bāsī ceremony may be offered to one's boss at New Year as is also offered to one's parents. The aim would appear to be to create the same network of rights and obligations between a boss and his subordinate as between a father and his son. Fundamentally the contract is that the superior provides food, shelter and protection in return for service and loyalty, and it mirrors the model of traditional authority that we identified between the king and his subjects and indeed between the phī bān (village spirit) and the population. I do not think it is too much to suggest, with Doré,[1] that there is a single ideological model of the relationship between superior and inferior, for which one can find the inspiration in Buddhism.

The Buddha's Sigala-sutta (Advice to Sigala)[2] is a good illustration of how closely the relationship father-son is identified with master-servant: the parent's obligations towards their children are that:

> "they restrain them from evil; they direct them towards good; they train them to a profession; they arrange suitable marriages for them; and, in due time, they hand over the inheritance to them".[3]

and the master's ideal relationship with his servants and employees is described as follows:

> "A master ministers to his servants and employees ... by assigning them work according to their capacity and strength; by supplying them with food and wages; by tending them in sickness; by sharing with them unusual delicacies; and by giving them leave and gifts at suitable times.

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1. Doré (1972a) pp. 44 ff.

2. Extracts are translated in Rahula (1967).

3. Ibid., p. 123.

> In these ways ministered to by their master, servants and employees love their master in five ways: they wake up before him; they go to bed after him; they take what is given to them; they do their work well; and they speak well of him and give him a good reputation".[1]

It therefore seems possible to say that as the father who has many children acquires piap, so does the official who has many subordinates. Status reflects control over all kinds of resources, human, financial and finally spiritual. Indeed it is perhaps in the reduction of significance of religious criteria of status that the biggest change has come. Many Lao might deny it and point to the vat buildings constructed and restored by the modern elite, but one certainly had the impression that pious works were often done to please their fathers, and that their sons would not bother. The symbols of status had changed. It was well summed up by one Lao who said that where the elite had once delighted to show themselves to the people riding on a fine elephant decked in beautiful clothes, they now sought to hide themselves away in Mercedes Benz with frosted glass and behind high walled villas.

Turner found in his Philippine town that "in general it seemed that the more expensive, exclusive, and possibly functionally unnecessary an item, the greater was the prestige accruing to its owner".[2] In Vientiane this might be true as a measurement of status within the elite. It was less true as an indication to outsiders of elite status, since the elder generation of the elite at least was rarely seen in public.[3]

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1. Ibid., p. 124.

2. Turner (1977) p. 235.

3. The fragile nature of the elite's control of economic resources, based on access to the distribution of foreign aid, was eventually exposed at the same time as their political authority collapsed. Their demise as a status group, and the flight of most of their number to France, the United States or Thailand followed soon after. The rapidity of their rise to power and wealth was surpassed only by the speed with which they lost it.

How did these new status criteria and symbols influence attitudes among the poorer urban people and in the rural areas? Perhaps the easiest way to envisage it, is to say that the new imported ideology had its greatest influence among the elite, and that its impact was reduced the further one went from the town, while the reverse was true of traditional status measurements. Naturally also young people were more susceptible to new ideas than the old. Nevertheless it will be clear that status in rural and urban areas has always been qualitatively different, with town life involving a quest for control over the productive labour of other people which was not present in the countryside.

I have not found it useful to identify any other specific status strata apart from the elite. The elite is distinct in terms of wealth, occupation and, to a considerable extent, education. In attempting to delimit any further groups, the problem of high status jobs being held by relatively poor people (e.g. junior government officials), while others gain status from wealth acquired through lower status activities such as shop-keeping, makes it difficult to establish consistent criteria.

New imported ideologies contrasted with the old, but often they seemed to mesh indistinguishably. The influence of each on specific types of relationship is the subject of the following sections.

Kinship

(1) Terminology

The main Lao-French dictionary lists six different terms for 'grandmother', of which three may also be used for 'mother-in-law', and most can be used as a general term for an old woman. On such evidence it might be imagined that Lao kinship terminology is an inex-

tricable maze. The temptation to persevere in such a conclusion is enhanced by reading what others have written on the subject. Laos, its people, its society, its culture[1] is typical. It treats 'Kinship and Inheritance' in 1½ pages, in which we are told basically that in Laos kinship ties are closer with close relatives than with distant ones!

What is the problem? First the theoretical understanding by anthropologists of the kinship, affinity and descent systems of lineal societies is more fully developed than that of cognatic societies. Secondly, in complex cognatic societies, the social functions of institutions such as those concerned with education or social control, which are often predominantly based on kinship, affinity and descent in lineal societies, are organised by institutions in which other principles, such as age, rank, neighbourhood and association are stressed. Consequently it may be supposed that the detailed study of kinship, affinity and descent will not reveal as much about the structure and organisation of cognatic societies as it does about lineal ones. In fact close study of the Lao kinship system seems to be worth the effort, though there are frustrating inconsistencies and conclusions are necessarily tentative.

To look first at terminology, a number of immediate comments on Lao reference terms for consanguines (see Fig. 5) are possible. First the principal feature of the chart is sharp differentiation among Ego's elder relatives, and little differentation among those younger than him. To indicate the sex of a younger relative one simply adds to the basic term given sāi for a male or sāo for a female (thus lūk sāi = son, lān sāo = niece or granddaughter), but this suffix is not used unless one particularly wishes or needs to indicate sex. With an elder relative the sex is already incorporated in the kinship terms. The

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1. LeBar and Suddard (1960).

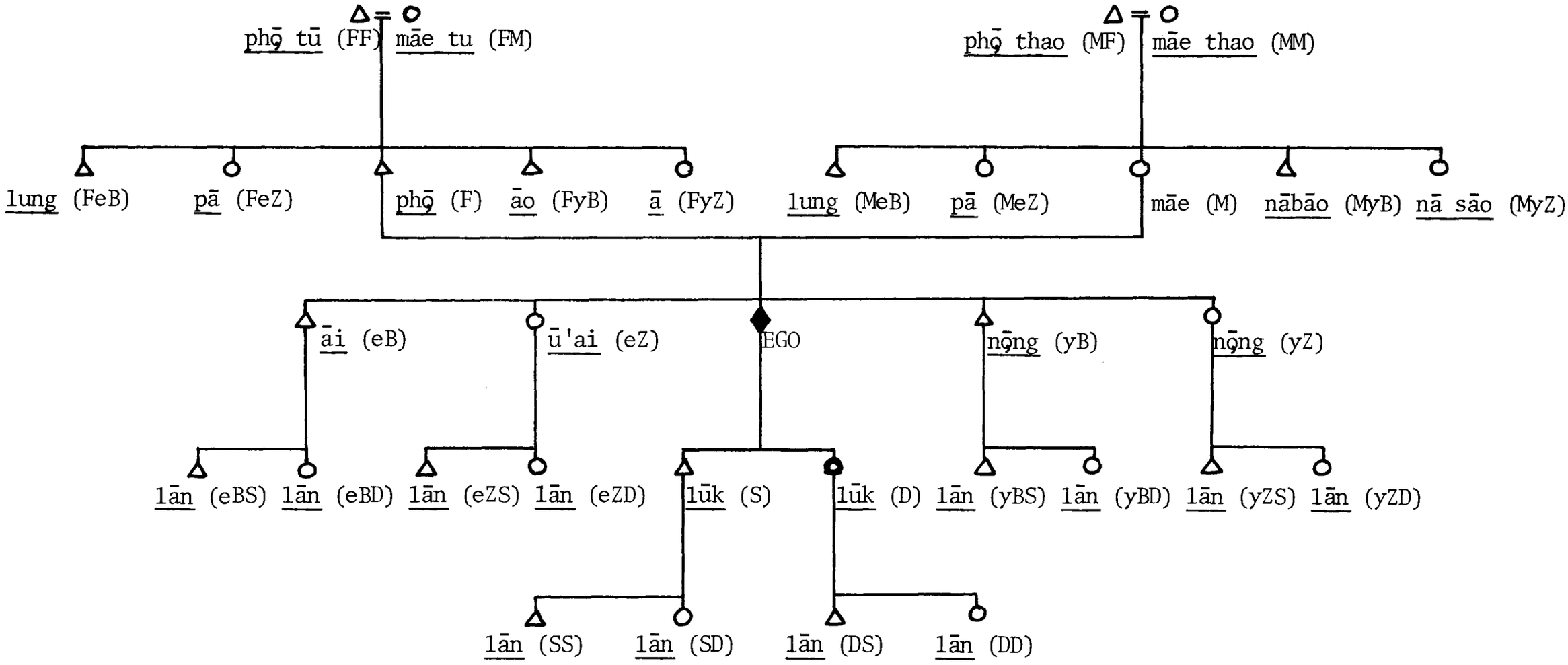


Fig. 5 Terms of reference for consanguineal kin

only possible exception is with the mother's younger brother and sister, where some informants claimed that the nā could be used without the bāo or sāo suffix, although most had never heard this.

Secondly, the chart in Fig. 5 is the referential system, and confusion may sometimes be created by use of variations in address. With consanguineal kin this is not such a problem as we shall discover with affinal, but even with consanguines the use of teknonymy in address, referring to a person as 'father of X' or 'mother of Y' is frequent. When the couple's first child is born, their own given names are not usually used again, at least in rural areas. In the towns, where civil servants can hardly abandon their names in the middle of their careers, the practice is to some extent dying out, though it is still used within the close family. In Ban Phon Sung, though, it was systematic, and was extended to cover other relationships, so that a senior uncle would be called lung followed by the name of his eldest child. So Lung Sing is ego's father's elder brother, and his eldest son is called Sing. However, the use of lung and pā, uncle and aunt, and also phǭ tū and māe tū, grandfather and grandmother, became formalised into a kind of fixed title, so that Lung Sing became known by that name to virtually everybody in the village, even including those for whom he was really a nā bāo or an āo.

In the referential system for affinal kin the following principles apply: first, spouses of consanguineal kin are identified with the consanguineal kin to whom they are married, regardless of their own age relative to Ego. Thus, if elder brother's wife is younger than Ego, he still refers to her as 'elder sister'. Secondly, in Ego's own or younger generations a suffix khōei (male) phai (female) is added to indicate an affinal relative.

The basic referential chart for the spouses of kin is given in Fig. 6. It can be completed by reference to the consanguineal chart (Fig. 5).

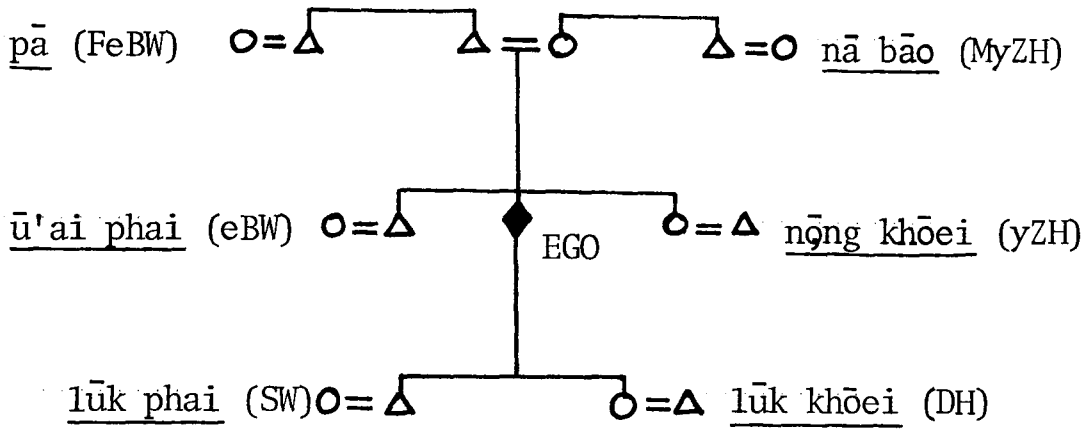


Fig. 6 Basic terms of reference for the spouses of kin

With the consanguineal kin of one's spouse, however, the referential terms are those that would be used by one's children towards the person involved. Thus, Ego refers to his wife's mother with the consanguineal term for mother's mother, as in Fig. 7.

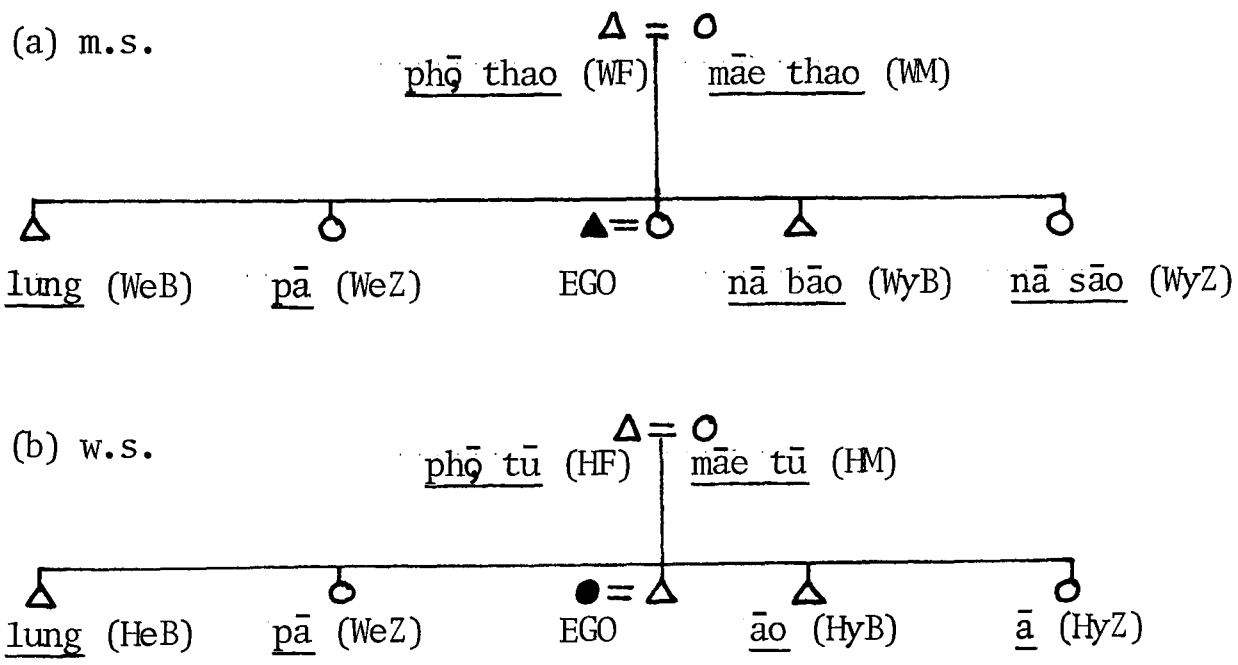


Fig. 7 Spouse's consanguineal kin

As indicated above, confusion about Lao kinship terminology has probably been created by variations in the system of address, and here

there is considerable freedom for individual choice and also regional variation. The guiding principle seems to be the search for an appropriate term. To give just two examples of the possibilities available, Fig. 8 shows the options open to Ego when addressing his wife's married elder brother or her unmarried younger sister:

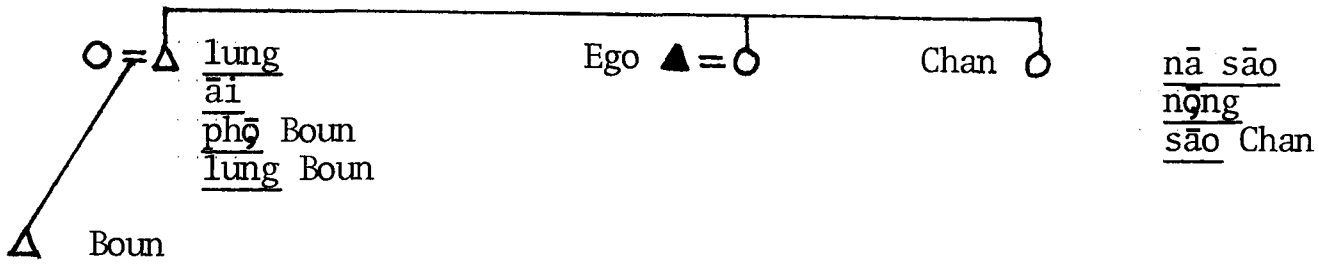


Fig. 8 Examples of variations in terms of address

The use of kinship terminology as forms of address varied greatly from country to town, and according to region. In Ban Phon Sung kinship terms were invariably used to refer to somebody senior to oneself. With unmarried junior relatives the name alone might be used. By association, every visitor to the village was immediately addressed by an appropriate kinship term. On my first visit to the village old people immediately addressed me as lān (nephew). In two or three families which I got to know particularly well, old people addressed me as lūk (son). People younger than me, and indeed some slightly older who wished to accord me the status they felt appropriate, called me āi (elder brother). Only in the group of men a few years older than me were there some who rejected the normal nōng (younger brother) in favour of thān (Mister) Martin. This was the form by which I was invariably addressed in Ban Savang. Even among the neighbours with whom I lived in extremely close contact for two years, this formal use of thān, indicating high status, followed by the personal name, was retained throughout. Only occasionally, though rarely in a gathering which included outsiders, would the old man who lived next door address

me as lūk.

Although this distinction between rural and urban practice refers to the treatment of a visiting foreigner, it closely mirrors actual practice between Lao. In town people considered senior were addressed as thān, sometimes followed by their name, although their occupational title, particularly if it was military, might be used. Very often the French language title was preferred to the Lao. Thus people were addressed as 'thān Colonel', and their wives very often as 'Madame'. In general the Lao term used in town for women senior to oneself was nyā māe (respected mother). However, these senior people might well use the kinship terms lūk and nǭng when addressing those junior to themselves. This would seem to be on the model, described above, assimilating subordinates to one's children.

In town, unmarried friends of the same sex usually used short nicknames for addressing each other, and this might be extended between the sexes if there was no particular personal relationship involved. However, as we shall see later, boyfriend and girlfriend inevitably addressed each other as āi (elder brother) and nǭng (younger sister).

It can be seen that Lao kinship terms are frequently extended in address to refer to people to whom there is no blood relationship. This practice helps to define the social relationship that has been established with that person, or which one desires to build up. There are several ways of doing this:

(2) Kinship by assimilation

Adoption

There is no formal adoption procedure in Laos, but casual adoption is commonplace. The term for an adopted child is lūk līang, or 'child

being fed', and the same suffix līang (indicating the act of feeding) is used by the child to refer to his foster parents (phǭ līang, māe līang). Such 'adoptions' may take place in a variety of circumstances. First, if a child's parents die, the child is normally adopted by one of the uncles or aunts, the choice depending on convenience and the wishes of those concerned. If the child was still young at the time, he would usually be brought up precisely as one of the children of the new parents, and would use the kinship terminology appropriate to his place in the new family, not that of his blood relationship. Secondly, parents who are unable, for one reason or another, to bring up their own children at some period in their lives, may hand them over to a relative temporarily. In this case the kinship terminology might not change. Thirdly, a couple who are barren may seek to adopt one or more children of relatives who have more than enough. In this case the adoptive relationship is exactly as a normal parent-child. In the first and third cases parents and children behave exactly as in any blood relationship, and the child usually has equal inheritance rights, although in the first case this may be contested. It is the second case which affords the most interesting possibilities. Young people who move temporarily away from their parents seek to acquire 'parents' in the new location. It can be imagined that with the geographical mobility inherent in the rapid growth of the towns, many such relations have been established.

In such a relationship the newcomer acquires a whole new set of kin, and his behaviour, his rights and his obligations towards his new 'parents' are patterned on those he has towards his blood family.

The age-mate ceremony

I have already noted that the only interpersonal relationship not

defined in terms of superior/inferior is that called sīu. This is contracted with a close friend of the same sex and age, and involves acquiring a new set of kin as well as a firmly bonded friend who can be relied upon to protect one's interests. In the complete ceremony each set of parents accepts their son's or daughter's sīu as their own child. The sīu then acquires the rights and obligations of a son in his sīu's family and adopts the appropriate kin terminology. He would not normally inherit anything, however, unless his sīu were to die, in which case, depending on circumstances, the bereaved family might wish to adopt him into their own.

Sponsorship

In the event that his own parents are not wealthy enough to afford an ordination ceremony, the candidate novice or monk for the Buddhist Sangha seeks a wealthier couple to act as his phō nyok, māe nyok, for the ceremony. The relationship thus established remains the equivalent of adoption once the boy has left the temple.

General assimilation

The most commonplace extension of kinship terminology in address is informal and involves the more or less casual assimilation of oneself into the other person's family. Any person with whom one establishes a friendly relationship can be accorded a kin term, based first of all on relative ages.

The kinship term chosen tells us something about the relationship desired or established with another person. The fact that modern practice in this regard is quite different in rural and urban areas will reveal important aspects of the differences in social relations in town and country.

(3) Kin relations and behaviour

The expression used in Lao to refer to people with whom one has a kin relationship of some kind is phī nǭng (literally: 'elder sibling/ younger sibling'). This term, undifferentiated in singular and plural, can cover all consanguineal and affinal kin, both genuine and fictitious. In the most general sense its use expresses the feeling that the person or persons referred to will be, or should be, ready to offer the facilities which are expected from a blood relative, or conversely that they will expect to receive those facilities from the speaker. Thus a person planning a journey might say to his companions, "Don't worry. I have phī nǭng in Vang Vieng" (understood - "and therefore we have no need to worry about food or accommodation").

The first obligation prescribed among kin is therefore that of mutual hospitality. Villagers say that in the past, if they saw a stranger walk into the village, they would immediately call out "Have you already eaten?" (understood - "If not, you're welcome to eat here"). If one automatically offered food and drink to a perfect stranger, how much more readily would one entertain a relative. Villagers claim that being phī nǭng with somebody meant sharing things to the point of giving the other anything they asked for.

Inevitably, however, such expressions of harmony in relations with one's relatives represent the sort of ideal behaviour described in the text of the marriage advice. In practice, even if one addresses the whole village by kinship terms, and even if one might be ready to say, "Yes, all the members of this village are my phī nǭng", the actual obligations felt towards specific individuals varied with the closeness of the blood relationship. Mutual hospitality for a meal and a place to sleep might extend to the furthest reaches of one's phī nǭng, but the

network of kin on whom one might depend for more substantial support, such as contributions to the cost of Buddhist ordination or marriage, or for a loan free of interest, would usually extend only as far as the consanguineal kin chart figure above. (Fig. 5)

Tambiah has offered a "formal picture of the village-wide status categories which divide the village into hierarchical segments".[1] There are four categories: (1) pū nyā tā nyāi - grandparents; (2) phǭ māe - parents; (3) phī nǭng - siblings; (4) lūk lān - children/grandchildren. These categories are used to refer to specific individuals and are also extended to refer, for example, to grandparents in general. Thus the phrase phǭ māe phū thao (parents/old people) is used to refer collectively to 'persons of father-mother status'.

Tambiah suggests that the conspicuous feature of kinship relations in the village he studied is

> "the phrasing of obligations and relationships in the idiom of four terms: grandparent, parent, sibling, and child-grandchild. These terms imply asymmetrical and reciprocal behaviour. There is no particular complex of behaviour attributes associated with, say, mother's brother as distinct from father's brother, father's sister as distinct from mother's sister. Close kin are naturally more important than distant kin, but which of the close kin (outside ego's families of procreation and orientation) depends on situational circumstances and not on jural norms".[2]

This is a useful analysis, bringing out as it does the strong bilateral emphasis in Lao kin relations, and pointing out the prime significance of rights and obligations across the generations rather than within them.

The one relationship of supreme importance within a generation is

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1. Tambiah (1970) p. 16.

2. Ibid., p. 17.

naturally that between boyfriend and girlfriend, husband and wife. In such relationships the boy is always āi (elder brother), the girl nǭng (younger sister), even if the girl is in fact older, and the use of the term says something about the way courting couples see their relationships together. Meanwhile the composite term āi nǭng, which literally means 'siblings', has come to be used in recent years to refer to the members of the Pathet Lao political movement. In 1974 people were forever discussing "when the āi nǭng come to power, ...". The Pathet Lao had managed to promote the use of a kinship term to refer to their people. The use of āi nǭng in such a context, very much equivalent to the use of 'brothers' in the English Labour movement, gives an indication of the breadth of meaning with which kinship terms can be invested.

To differentiate between a fictitious phī nǭng and a genuine one, the word khīng, 'body', can be added. "He is my āi khīng" - He is my 'body' brother". However, the opposition of 'fictitious' and 'genuine' kinship relations do not mirror Lao concepts. Sometimes, if an informant said, 'Mr X is my āi", I would ask, "Is he your real āi?" The answer was usually yes. If I then asked, "Same father, same mother?" the answer might be no. The āi was no less a 'real' brother for not having the same parents. He was not a 'body' brother though. Simple kinship terms in Lao are therefore indicators of social categories, which do not necessarily reflect the indicated blood relationships.

Lao kinship terminology indicates a bilateral system and as there are no formalised descent groups, clearly we are dealing with a cognatic society. This assessment might not be shared in an unqualified way by all writers, however.

Doré says categorically, "the Lao family is patrilineal",[1] but since he does not establish the existence of lineages or unilineal descent groups, this is difficult to accept. It is possible that he is referring to the model of male primogeniture in the royal family, but even there property inheritance remains bilateral, though with a patrilateral bias. The cult of the phī bān, the spirit of the village founder, or indeed the introduction of patronymic surnames, by order of the French colonial authorities, may have contributed to ideas of patrilineality, but it seems more likely that he means to refer to the strong patriarchal dominance of the father in family affairs.

Certainly there are Tai-speaking groups quite closely connected with the Lao who have patrilineal descent groups. The Tai Dam have a strong patrilineal system, importing wives onto land holdings (terraced rice fields) exploited by patrilineages. The Tai Dam group of 18 households in Ban Savang is part of such a descent group, under the leadership of its senior patrilineage member, but this has no direct relevance to the Lao.

On the opposite side, ideas of possible matrilineality have been fuelled by the general preference for matrilocal residence after marriage, and by the particular position of the youngest daughter who usually inherits the parents' house. Turton[2] has identified matrilineal descent groups among the Tai Yuan of Northern Thailand, but I have discovered no evidence for such groups among the Lao, and one must conclude that there is no reason to suppose that the Lao kinship and descent systems harbour any unilineal tendencies.

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1. Doré (1972a) p. 12.

2. Turton (1972).

It may be of more interest, however, to examine the idea of the 'matrifocal family' as defined, for example, by R.T. Smith.[1] Smith is at pains to show that he does not imply that women are necessarily the household head in a matrifocal family. He implies rather a tendency in which "groups of women, daughters and daughters' children emerge to provide a basis of continuity and security". He notes that in all cases put forward as examples of 'matrifocal family structure' there is "an expectation of strong male dominance in the marital relationship and as head of the household, coupled with a reality in which mother-child relations are strongly solidary".[2]

The elements which Smith includes in "the matrifocal complex" are: (a) domestic relations - where there is a marked sex-role differentiation and men are excluded from participation in child-rearing, cooking and other domestic activities, being occupied rather with "the 'external' systems of social, economic, political and ritual activity".[3] (b) familial relations - where there is a "low priority of solidary emphasis placed upon the conjugal relationship within the area of 'close family' ties",[4] i.e. the husband-wife relationship is less 'solidary' than the mother-child or brother-sister, for example. (c) stratification and economic factors - "the absence of property and status considerations is particularly conducive to the development of a matrifocal system".[5]

How far, then, can the Lao kinship system be termed 'matrifocal', and what does the discussion of such a designation teach us about the operation of Lao society?

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1. Smith (1973).
2. Ibid., p. 129.
3. Ibid., p. 139.
4. Ibid., p. 140.
5. Ibid., p. 142.

My data from Ban Phon Sung can be gathered into Table 27 below. Of the nine one-parent households, six had mothers and three fathers. The three one-generation households were an elderly couple whose children had all moved out, an elderly widow living alone and a newly married couple. The three father-children households all had a daughter of at least 15 years old. The six mother-children included two with no male members at all. There were therefore no households in which there was no woman, but three in which there was no man.

Table 27 Ban Phon Sung - Household composition

	Households	Total	Average per household
Three generations	32 (35.6%)	275 (47.3%)	8.59
Two generations	55 (61.1%)	301 (51.8%)	5.47
Nuclear	(41)	(231)	(5.63)
One-parent	(9)	(38)	(4.22)
Nuclear + son-in-law	(4)	(22)	(5.5)
" + wife's brother	(1)	(9)	(9)
One generation	3 (3.3%)	5 (0.9%)	1.67
	90	581	6.46

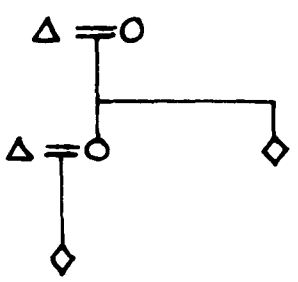
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Of the 32 three or four generation households, 22 consisted of a woman (with or without husband), her daughter (with or without husband), the daughter's children, and sometimes the daughter's unmarried siblings. This group therefore had a minimum extension (a) and a maximum (b)

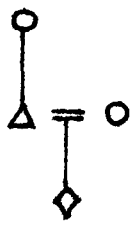
(a)

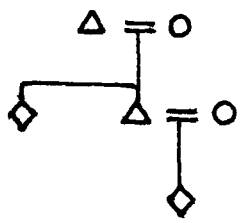


(b)

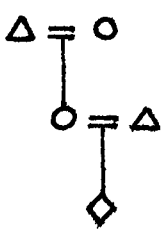


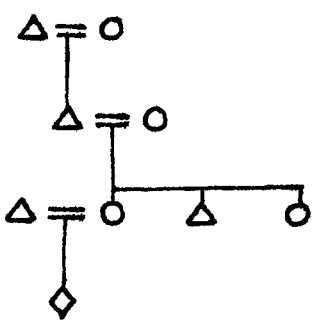
Seven households comprised a woman (with or without husband), her son, her son's wife, their children (and sometimes the son's unmarried siblings). This group had a minimum extension (a) and a maximum (b)

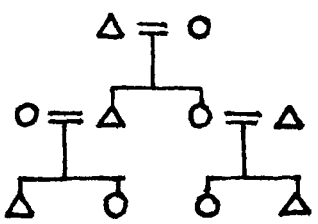
(a) 

(b) 

One household comprised a man, his daughter, her husband and their children, (a), and two households contained elements of both patterns, i.e. a woman, her daughter and children and a woman, her son, his wife and children, (b) and (c)

(a) 

(b) 

(c) 

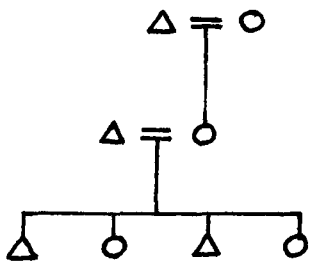
The bias in these patterns is clearly produced first of all by the preference for matrilocal residence after marriage, and the inheritance of the house by the youngest daughter. However, one should try to be clear which is the cart and which the horse. Is matrilocal residence preferred, because the family is 'solidary' with its female members, or does the Lao family have a matrifocal look about it because matrilocal residence is preferred? Let us introduce some more facts.

In the three father-children families, the mother had died in each case, whereas of the six mother-children families two fathers had left the household. Of the seven households where a woman (and sometimes her husband) was living with her son, her son's wife and their children, two had no daughters at all, three had daughters who had not yet reached marriageable age (in these cases one can assume that the son and his wife would move out when the daughter got married), and only in two

cases did mothers appear to be living with their sons when they could have been living with married daughters.

I have noted that 58/90 households (64.4%) are one or two generation households. However, if we look at the percentage of the village population who live in these households, the proportion is down to 52.7% (306/581). Not surprisingly, the three generation households are larger and contain nearly half the population. If we imagine that the four young women whose husbands have just moved in, each produced a child, transferring their households to the three generation level, then there would be 301/585 (51.4%) living in three generation households.

What can we conclude? I do not think it is too much to say that the 'ideal' household composition, towards which Lao families aim in the course of their domestic cycle, is that of a woman, her husband, her daughter, her daughter's husband and their children, thus:



However, the vagaries of birth, death and the domestic cycle mean that this can hardly be achieved all the time. If one can survive until the age of 60, however, the chances of finding oneself in such circumstances are good. Out of 33 residents of Ban Phon Sung of 60 or older, 18 are living with a daughter and her children, seven are living with a son, his wife and their children, three have daughters recently married but without children so far, two have daughters of marriageable age. The other three are an elderly couple whose children have all moved away and a woman living with three unmarried granddaughters (the parents being dead).

It is also possible that a more widely applicable ideal than that a woman should live with her youngest daughter is that a woman should live as far as possible in close proximity to all her daughters. This brings us back to Smith's criteria of the matrifocal family. His first feature was a sharp differentiation between male and female roles. This was certainly present in Laos. If asked about the difference between the roles, duties and opportunities of men and women, Lao informants always gave categorical answers of the "How could you ask such an obvious question?" type. The man goes out (ǭk pai) to work. He goes to search for food (hā kin). He is the leader of the family. He makes contact with the outside. The woman, on the other hand, stays at home (yū bān). She looks after the children. She cooks for her husband. She tidies the house. She follows (pai nam) her husband.

The man therefore is seen as mobile, adventurous, even a hunter, while the woman is stable, passive and suckles her young. The evidence in Ban Phon Sung of course supports such a view. Out of a resident population of 579, 306 (52.8%) are women, even though men are substantially in the majority in the over 50s (surprisingly) and in the under 15s. In the age range 15-49 there are 140 women to 89 men. But if the cycle is repeated, these absent men will gradually return from their adventures and settle down with their stable home-making women.

Smith's second criterion was "the low priority of solidary emphasis placed upon the conjugal relationship". The conjugal relationship in Lao society would certainly seem to be the least 'solidary' of the 'close family' ties. Divorce, separation, abandonment are frequent, though difficult to compute since largely informal. In any case the results during a period of social and political upheaval, with many unusually mobile young men, would have been impossible to interpret in

terms of 'traditional' practices. In any event marriage is considered a fragile relationship by comparison with those between parents and children. As will appear in my discussion of marriage, great efforts are made to ensure that marriages last, but infidelity, jealousy, the practice of taking additional wives, barrenness, drink, violence, mothers-in-law and simple incompatibility all take their toll. I do not think that Lao marriage is as fragile or as casual as Smith's West Indian examples, but the chances of a matrifocal family developing are clearly greater if the husband can simply walk out on his wife - an easier thing to envisage than packing her off to her mother, which may provoke reprisals from her family. Similarly a woman, whose domain is the house, can make the place uninhabitable for her husband in a way that he cannot do for her, so that he is the one who is obliged to leave.

Smith's third criterion of a matrifocal family was 'stratification and economic factors', but he treats these only briefly and apart from saying that the absence of property and status considerations is conducive to matrifocality does not indicate how these factors operate. We can suppose perhaps that the relatively undifferentiated economic status of traditional Lao villagers would have been more conducive to matrifocality than the increasingly status conscious environment of the modern Lao towns.

The concept of 'matrifocality' seems to me to be useful as a possible anchor in the uncharted waters of bilateral kinship studies if it is defined along the lines which Elizabeth Bott described for a bilateral kinship system with 'matrilateral stress'. Smith quotes her:

> "whenever there are no particular economic advantages to be gained by affiliation with paternal relatives, and whenever two or preferably three generations of mothers and daughters are living in the same place at the same time, a bilateral kinship system is likely to develop a matrilateral stress, and groups composed of sets of mothers and daughters may form within networks of kin. ..... these groups of mothers and daughters have no structural continuity ..... they are readily dissolved if their members are separated from one another".[1]

In fact Bott's British working class examples would seem to be a good deal more relevant to the Lao case than Smith's own West Indian data, where the marriage relationship is exceptionally unstable. Such informal groups of mothers and daughters as Bott describes giving 'a matrilateral stress' to a bilateral kinship system are frequently encountered in Lao society in places where matrilocal residence is preferred, partly because of marked sex-role differentiation, partly because of the relative instability of the marriage bond and partly because of the mobility of young men in their search for employment away from home.

(4) Behaviour between kin - ideals and realities

In De l'hibiscus à la frangipane Pierre Doré writes:

> "Within the traditional Lao family the father enjoys the highest status. He is the main promoter of the family economy ... in occasionally becoming a monk he is the one who gains prestige (piap) and merit (bun) for himself and his family. Traditionally the family is considered as belonging to him, either by natural right (children or animals born of his property) or by prestations (wives) or by purchases (animals, material goods)".

Doré then quotes a passage from an article by Inpheng Suryadhay:

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1. Bott (1957) pp. 137-8.

> "Every night before going to bed, Lao women prostrate themselves at the feet of their husbands to ask pardon for all the bad things they have done during the day. They cannot lie on the same pillow as their husbands, who have a pillow placed higher. In addition, they may not sleep just anywhere they like on the marriage bed, but invariably to the left of their husbands, so that the man can seize his sword at the first sign of danger. During a meal they may only begin to eat when their husbands have reached the third mouthful".[1]

Doré continues:

> "However, following a cultural model found in China and Vedic India, the mother enjoys a relatively high status. The family's money is deposited with her and she has complete charge of the internal affairs of the household, in which her husband takes little part.
>
> The father and mother are the object of a veritable cult on the part of their children, which is expressed by permanent attitudes (gestures, words, thoughts). A fault of etiquette committed towards them is considered to be bāp, 'sin'.
>
> At the New Year, children must render their parents special homage by prostrating themselves at their feetto ask and receive pardon for their faults committed during the past year.
>
> In return parents ensure the children's livelihood (līang), protection (haksā), justice (nyutti tham) and use educational methods which are generally very soft. Their affection is directed particularly towards the youngest with whom relationships are conceived of as a permanent delight".[2]

I have quoted at length from Doré because he sums up well the way in which Lao talk about ideal behaviour within the family. Later in his book he identifies the source of these ideal modes as the teachings of Buddhism. Specifically he quotes a long passage from the famous Sigala-sutta in which the Buddha spells out the mutual duties and obligations of parents and children, teacher and pupil, husband and wife, friends and relatives, master and servant, monks and the laity. For example, the relation between children and parents is described as follows:

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1. Suryadhay (1970) p. 5.

2. Doré (1972a) pp. 17-18.

> "A child should minister to his parents ... in five ways (saying to himself): Once I was supported by them, now I will be their support; I will perform those duties they have to perform; I will maintain the lineage and tradition of my family; I will look after my inheritance; and I will give alms (perform religious rites) on behalf of them (when they are dead)".[1]

Buddhism is certainly the inspiration for much of the moral teaching received by Lao children, as Christianity is in western society. But just as ideal teaching of morality in the west does not guarantee appropriate behaviour, nor does it in Buddhist Laos. Doré is perhaps tempted into believing that traditional observance of the rituals, which identified the ideal relationship between members of the family, reflected a comparable standard of behaviour at the level of practice. I am hardly competent to assert categorically what were the relations between husbands and wives, parents and children, in eighteenth century Laos for example, but it is clear that in Ban Phon Sung by 1974 there were other forces at play than the simple moral authority of husband over wife or parents over children which the rituals seem to presuppose. Before examining some of those forces we should look briefly at the ceremony in which children pay "a special homage by prostrating themselves at their (parents') feet".

The ceremony of sommā is performed most notably immediately after the marriage ceremony when the newly wedded couple prostrate themselves three times in front of their parents and request pardon for the errors of their youthful lives. In a sense the ceremony incorporates each of the partners into the family of his spouse, by making each perform the act of homage which they had regularly performed for their own parents in front of their spouse's parents. The sommā then is the same ceremony that children perform for their parents every year at New

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1. Translated in Rahula (1967) p. 123. For the parent-child relationship see p. 302.

Year, and the same principle is found in the act of prostration performed, according to Inpheng Suryadhay, every night by a wife in front of her husband (although young Lao laugh at the idea that such practices might still be performed).

The triple prostration is the same gesture which a layman makes before a monk, and represents a token of submission and respect before somebody in a higher social category in whose debt one stands. The layman is indebted to the monk for providing him with the opportunity to gain merit by giving alms. Children are indebted to their parents for the gift of life and food. Wives are indebted to their husbands for providing food, protection and spiritual merit. The ceremony symbolises the gesture of an inferior to a superior, usually a superior upon whose continued beneficence one is relying.

The realities of kin relations in Ban Phon Sung were a trifle more mundane. The first thing one observed was the enormously greater freedom enjoyed by boys than by girls. Boys over the age or 14 or 15 were considered to be basically uncontrollable. They did not often go to the bad, but if they did there was little one could do about it. This freedom, and the mobility that the war with its opportunities for soldiering and commerce had brought, was not altogether new. One of the most respected village elders, aged 65, described to me how he had spent much of his youth travelling from village to village, trading a bit and chatting up the girls. One of his specialities was climbing the tallest and most difficult coconut trees and collecting the fruit for their owners (a feat which he demonstrated while I was there!). This man had a son who came and went with the impetuousness of youth. He could have tough arguments with his father, although there was still a tone of respect. The annual ritual obeisance did not take away from the fact that the relationship was often strained.

Girls were inculcated from an early age with the subordinate nature of their role. For the most part they appeared docile, hard-working and contented. Their mothers had often, however, taught them a healthy scepticism about the trustworthiness of the male sex, so that, as we shall see, they were vigorous opponents in courtship and often quite independent as wives.

As already suggested, the husband-wife relationship was the most vulnerable. In the next sections I follow it through discussions of courtship and marriage. The most stable and 'solidary' relationship was mother-daughter. Men were more likely to be caught up in any disruptions, such as those caused by increasing foreign influence, economic advances and the destruction of war. Already in Chapter Five I noted that commercialisation of the rural economy was reducing the levels of generosity within the village. Asked whether "the villagers of Ban Phon Sung are all related to each other (pen phī nǭng)?" a villager replied, "Certainly we are all related". I discovered that even from my incomplete data I could link 42 of the 90 households in the village in a single chain of consanguineal or affinal ties between living people. By going back one or two generations one could certainly link 90% of the villagers in one long family tree. The reduction of generosity among villagers is therefore a reduction of the close ties among phī nǭng. The impression given is that even in the rural context of Ban Phon Sung the closeness of relations with distant kin is decreasing as economic diversity increases, and that 'conjugal family' ties of parents and their children are receiving correspondingly greater emphasis. It is not surprising that this should be so in the town, where kin ties frequently have to be maintained over great distances.

(5) Kin relations in Ban Savang and the urban environment

Predictably Ban Savang has a far greater proportion of two generation families than Ban Phon Sung. An equivalent chart to that on page 318 gives the following:

Table 28 Ban Savang Household composition

	Household	Total	Average per household
Three generations	13 (19.1%)	124 (24.4%)	9.54
Two generations	51 (75.0%)	370 (72.8%)	7.25
Nuclear	(26)	(165)	(6.35)
One-parent	(5)	(16)	(3.2)
Nuclear + child's spouse	(5)	(60)	(12.0)
Nuclear + consanguineal relatives	(15)	(129)	(8.6)
One generation	4 (5.9%)	14 (2.8%)	3.5
	68	508	7.47

****

Over three-quarters of the sample live in one or two generation households, where in Ban Phon Sung the figure is just over half. In fact five of the 13 three generation households are from the Tai Dam group of six refugee families. If we eliminate the 50 Tai Dam individuals from consideration, then fully 82.5% of the remaining 458 individuals live in one or two generation households. Where the Tai Dam refugees brought their entire families with them, the ethnic Lao migrants have for the most part left their parents at home. The main movement into town was led by young men, eventually bringing with them wives who would not inherit the family home in their villages of origin, or who had ceded that right to a sibling.

The urban environment, the developing economic situation, the

growth of a social elite, and the fragmentation of the village-based extended family helped to produce a number of marked tendencies in the development of kin relations during the 1960s and early 1970s.

Once again it is difficult to be precise about cause and effect, but one can note a number of the contributing elements. First, the French insisted in 1943 on the general use of surnames throughout the country. In Ban Phon Sung in 1974 this order had changed nothing. In Vientiane, however, surnames became an important indicator within the elite. A number of large, wealthy families grew up and began to dominate the military and the civil service. Two of the largest and most influential had the surnames Sananikone and Souvannavong. Recruitment into these families was not only through the male line, though the surnames were supposed to be inherited from fathers, as in Europe. An outsider might marry a Sananikone woman, and with the permission of the woman's senior relatives, take the surname Sananikone for himself and their children. It so happened that these two families became identified as opponents in the political arena, the Sananikones being found primarily in the military, the police and as politicians (they were Americanophiles), while the Souvannavongs were almost exclusively civil servants and Francophile. Marriage between the two families was practically unheard of, but there was an early case of a Sananikone man marrying a Souvannavong woman, perhaps before the families split. This couple had two sons. The elder went into the army, taking his father's name. The younger took his mother's maiden surname and joined the civil service.

Among the elite, therefore, the extended family, which in rural areas was based on mutual help for the exploitation of a particular piece of land, and was largely coterminous with the village, developed into a sort of political association. Naturally enough the different

motive forces behind such a grouping resulted in somewhat different types of interpersonal relations. The most significant of these changes was in the choice of marriage partner. Where in the village the choice was made predominantly by those concerned and ratified by the parents, elite families sought to make marriage alliances for political ends, by association with the practice of the aristocracy. As we shall see, this greatly increased the possibility of conflict between parents and children, particularly between fathers and daughters.

This use of kin relations for political purposes by elite commoner families gave what one might term, with Bott, a 'patrilateral stress' to the elite kinship system. The woman's significance as an owner of inherited property began to pale by comparison with the man's significance as possessor of an advanced education and a prestigious surname. The practice of bride-wealth, paid by the man to his wife's family, took on increased significance. It seems clear that prior to the colonial period the sums involved outside the royal family had been token amounts. Now the father of daughters might hope to compensate himself for their lack of future earning power by demanding a large sum in bride-wealth.

Meanwhile, the ideal relations between parents and children, husbands and wives, enshrined in Buddhist teaching, which we saw not too severely tested in Ban Phon Sung, came under strain in the new urban environment. Some wealthy families confided much of the domestic up-bringing of their children to servants and the formal education to French teachers. Inevitably there was room for conflict between the Buddhist ideals of a traditional education and the culture which young people imbibed in French schools, at the cinema and on the sports field. Among the most potent lessons they learnt was the spirit of competition. They were introduced to competitive sports and their school careers were fiercely competitive, with regular examinations for limited places.

The only traditional competitive game, tī khī, was distinguished by the result being fixed before the start. The Buddhist philosophy, which had motivated their ancestors, stressed co-operation - sāmakhī - a practical philosophy in a country with adequate natural resources to feed its small population. The influx of western ideas of competition coincided with a population explosion and reduction of the cultivable area due to war, which together led to the beginnings of competition for scarce natural resources in a political climate of total laissez-faire.

Economic differentiation began to influence parent-child relationships, as some poorer children bemoaned their fathers' inability to get rich like the others, and as richer children became aware of the corrupt means their parents used to obtain their wealth. In Vientiane there were young people who despised their parents for their ill-gotten gains, but frittered away large allowances in bars, cinemas and restaurants. Those who had had a complete French education could often not write their native language, and children of the elite who were sent to France for secondary education sometimes returned being unable to communicate in any way with their mothers who were illiterate and spoke only Lao. An increase in formality in actual contacts between parents and children, which reminded one of Victorian English practice of elaborate courtesies from son to father, for example, was accompanied by a decrease in the mutual respect between parents and children.

This sort of development is well known in the Western Europe of this century, as rapid technological advances, particularly in communications, have hastened the relaxation of traditional mores. In Laos the extraordinary speed of the change is what strikes one. I knew families where the parents had spent the first 25 years of their lives in remote villages practising subsistence agriculture almost totally

without contact with the outside world. Their children, in some cases, have never set foot in a rice-field, and spent the time when they were not in a French language school listening to the Beatles, watching American cowboy movies at the cinema and drinking Heineken at the bars. Naturally enough the relationships between parents and children in the urban context often became strained.

Surprisingly perhaps, the deterioration of relationships between husband and wife appears to have been almost as pronounced. There seem to have been a number of factors involved, though it is difficult to assign a specific weighting to each.

First of all, I noted above the considerable sex-role differentiation in Lao rural society. Women remained in charge of domestic arrangements, while men were involved outside. There were, however, a number of agricultural and other activities which men and women undertook together, notably the major rice-growing jobs like transplanting, harvesting and threshing. In the town a woman never participated in the work of her husband. He went to work, she stayed at home. Furthermore, the children who in the countryside were endlessly in and out of the house, spent the whole day in school after the age of 5. Thirdly, the wife who in the village had been permanently surrounded by mothers, aunts, cousins, etc., was often, in the town, living isolated from her relatives. Fourthly, the new rich could afford to hire servants to do domestic work, and in some cases men looked upon their wives as beautiful ornaments who should not be allowed out except in the company of their husbands, when they could be admired by all around. Finally, and perhaps most seriously, the new education was predominantly for the boys. Many parents pushed their sons up to university, while daughters received a smattering of primary education.

The result was that urban wives suffered from boredom. Near my house in Ban Savang there was a typical example. The wife of a civil servant had four children. All were in school. Husband and children were away all day. She did nothing. Occasionally she did a bit of sewing or knitting. Even more occasionally one of the neighbours would call by for a chat, but for most of the day she simply sat on her veranda, or lay on the divan under the house dozing or looking at the view. In her case the only unfortunate result was that she gradually began to pay even less attention to the few things she did have to do. However, among many of the richer wives there developed a mania for gambling. Not many seem to have taken to drink seriously, and only a few were reported to be having affairs, but playing cards for money simply took over. Women lost their husbands' fortunes, neglected their children, and virtually decamped when a funeral allowed a three or four day gambling stint. Their husbands were abandoned to cook their own food, wash their own clothes. The considerable social opprobrium which was heaped on such behaviour could not change these ladies. It was a tragic but fascinating phenomenon. The numbers involved were impossible to compute, since gaming was technically illegal, but it might well be that among the elite one woman in every three or four was a regular card player for money.

Men also gambled of course, but on the whole they were fewer and less fanatical. Gambling was probably the single most important cause of marriage break-up among the elite.

Among the poorer urban inhabitants the problem for women was not boredom so much as poverty. Totally inadequate wages for day labourers and for the thousands of ordinary soldiers who left their wives in the town meant that mothers had to find a way to contribute to the family budget. Although many traded in a small way at the market, increasing

numbers of poor women found that the easiest way to make ends meet was through prostitution. It has been calculated that in Bangkok more women are prostitutes than the numbers of teachers and nurses combined. In Vientiane between 1965 and 1975 the same was certainly true. Again no attempt has been made to compute the numbers involved, but in 1971 there were 2,203 female teachers at all levels in the entire country. There were almost certainly more women in Vientiane city alone who were at least casually engaged in prostitution.

The majority of prostitutes had been abandoned by their husbands (or simply by the fathers of their children) either voluntarily or because they were sent away as soldiers. Some, however, practised with the knowledge and consent of their husbands. The clientele for this large group of women came mainly from among the husbands of the rich ladies we left gambling a few paragraphs ago, although there was also a significant foreign clientele, particularly unattached Thais, Filipinos, Americans and Taiwanese posted to Vientiane with USAID, Air America and similar organisations.

The large-scale practice of this profession inevitably had an impact on husband-wife relations in Vientiane. Respectable wives assumed their husbands were in a brothel if they went out for an evening with their friends. Some wives claimed not to mind casual affairs for money, but spent a great deal of time worrying that their husbands were becoming seriously involved with their secretaries. While sexual morality was certainly not prudish in rural villages, the western concept of guilt began gradually to play a role in urban areas. A lot of men, at all levels of society, took to drink in a big way. In Ban Phon Sung many men drank very large quantities on festival days, but almost none drank more than a single tot at any other time. In Vientiane there was always an excuse, an occasion for

drink, and a number of men took to it heavily and disastrously.

In conclusion, the fragile social and economic background to life in Vientiane, the absence of traditional activities, of social companionship and control, the fragmentation of the extended kin group located within a single village community, the confusion inherent in conflicting moral and educational standards, the effects of the war and of imported cultural and technological innovations, all contributed to a deterioration of 'close family' ties, and specifically parent-child and husband-wife relationships. At the end of this chapter I examine in more detail some specific deviant activities, their possible origins and the relative incidence in rural and urban areas. In the following sections on courtship and marriage I shall deepen my analysis of the rift that grew up between rural and urban ways of life.

Lao 'traditional' courtship

The idyllic scenes of Lao courtship which one reads about in travel books or articles by Lao writers go something like this: after a hard day's work in the fields a group of village boys decides to *lin sāo* (literally: 'play/girls'). Having made sure that their number includes one proficient on the *khāen* and at least one accomplished singer, they set out to visit the houses of the fairest girls in the village. At each house they are greeted with reserve and decorum by the girl in question, who invites them in and goes off to prepare tea. While she is doing this, other members of the host family may engage in light conversation with the boys. When the girl returns to serve their tea and sit opposite them, the singer and the khāen player start up and improvise a song extolling the girl's exceptional beauty and

talents, and bemoaning her coldness and indifference towards the admittedly unimpressive charms of the young men in the village. If the girl is talented, she will reply using the same improvised singing formula,[1] riposting that they only come to tease her and flatter her in the hope of seeing her weak heart broken by their fickle treatment of a defenceless girl. And so the repartee continues, until the boys are ready to move on. If the girl is no singer, she will interject spoken comments between the verses, while perhaps demonstrating her talents in other respects, such as quietly carrying on with her sewing while the boys sing and chatter.

If one of the boys is attracted by the girl being visited he may have imparted his feelings to a friend in the group. The friend can then let the girl know that she has an admirer in the group by roundabout references to people he knows who have lost their appetites and spend sleepless nights. The next stage is for the boy in question to pluck up courage to remain behind when his friends move on, and begin the task of wooing in earnest. Here the attitude of the girl's family comes in: if they approve of the boy, they can ease his way by making him feel welcome when he visits and by discreetly retiring to bed at an appropriate moment and leaving the couple alone. If the family disapprove, or if the girl finds the boy's attentions unwelcome, then they can easily make his visits unpleasant, so that he soon abandons his pursuit.

The best occasions for making new contacts, especially with young people from neighbouring villages, are the festivals which take place during the dry season. Each village chooses a date, preferably a full

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1. These song traditions, known under the generic names khap and lam, vary from region to region (see Compton (1974)).

moon, that does not clash with that chosen by their neighbours. On the day the girls of the host village set up stalls within the temple grounds where they sell home-made sweets to the visiting young men who wander round in groups, sizing up the talent and taking the opportunity to sit and chat with a girl who takes their fancy, for the price of a piece of toffee. A booth would also have been set up where the girls from the host village who were talented singers would be seated against one wall, with a small orchestra playing away, awaiting the arrival of the first group of boys from another village willing to take them on in a ngan (what the French have termed 'cour d'amour'). Here the improvised singing goes backwards and forwards between individual singers on each side with everyone joining in the choruses. Also available is a stand where another orchestra plays traditional Lao dances and the boys try to persuade the girls of their choice to accompany them on the dance floor.

Some writers suggest that supervision of the girls at these festivals is lax and that couples are free to wander off quietly and engage in more intimate pleasures.

If the courtship comes to fruition, the boy asks his parents to send an intermediary to the girl's parents to sound out the prospects for marriage. If the first reaction is positive, then marriage negotiations are entered into, leading up to the traditional marriage ceremony. If the girl should become pregnant, then the arrangements for the marriage are speeded up. If the parents on one side or the other, though usually the girl's, should object to the marriage, then the outcome in fact depends on the girl's decision. If she elopes with her boyfriend or gets pregnant by him, her parents usually relent and reluctantly agree to sanction the match. If she sees her duty

towards her parents to be supreme, then she bows to their wishes.

This brief description of Lao courtship procedures is, I think, a fair amalgamation and paraphrase of the elements contained in the general surveys of Lao society and of the descriptions received from Lao informants. Certain elements can be abstracted at once: first, the procedure is one of activity on the part of the boy and passivity, either in acceptance or rejection, on the part of the girl. Girls receive visiting young men in their own homes or within the grounds of their village temple. Furthermore, the girl is morally as well as geographically tied down. She must defend herself against the unprincipled advances of her admirers. Secondly, courtship is clearly linked to cultural activities - low, rather than high, culture, since participation is the key. The raison d'être of a number of cultural forms is to be found in the delights of courtship. Thirdly, the potential for conflict between personal inclination and family loyalty is clearly present, though I have not yet analysed why there should be such a conflict.

It is difficult to be sure how far the above description accurately reflects actual practice in traditional society. Certainly in modern rural society it represents an ideal picture which can only be approximated in reality. In the modern urban context the gap between ideal and actual behaviour is even wider.

Modern rural courtship

The following description is based mainly on observation and interviews in the rural areas of the Vientiane plain, and particularly in Ban Phon Sung, though information from other areas has been taken into account.

The first thing to note is perhaps the diversity of types of courtship, the endless permutations of unrequited love, fickle hearts, unsympathetic parents, which recurred in the personal histories which I collected. If the picture of Lao rural courtship drawn in the text-books is idyllic, its modern reality seemed to be frequently depressing. There are a number of initial considerations: first, in Ban Phon Sung there were 12 boys aged between 15-19 and 46 girls. This proportion is probably quite typical of a rural village in the early 1970s. Quite simply the boys have gone off for education, urban jobs or to join the army. The girls have stayed at home. This disparity reflects attitudes which are frequently expressed by older villagers. The man is the head of the family, he has to make a living, he can afford to be adventurous. If the thing to do is to become educated, then he should pursue it as far as possible. The man is a legitimate traveller, a trader. He should not sit around at home too much, especially if he does not have extensive rice-fields and livestock to look after. The woman on the other hand is tied to the house.[1] The woman has no obvious need for education, since her future life will be involved with practical matters like raising children, making clothes, cooking and keeping house. The better she shows herself to be at discharging domestic duties in a pleasant, efficient and loyal manner, the more attractive she will seem to future suitors as a potential wife. In addition, the parents will have a mercenary advantage in seeing that daughters maintain good reputations, since the better the reputation, the higher the bride-price they can hope to obtain. The only sure way for a girl to preserve her reputation is to stay at home and work hard.

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1. Interestingly the male rural villager is always referred to as phō nā - father of the rice-field, while the female is referred to as māe hū'an - mother of the house.

The absence of boys from the village, however, does not mean that the village girls are not being courted. All that happens is that the boys have to come from further afield, and the courtship may take a rather different form. Every Saturday and Sunday small groups of boys on motorcycles could be seen approaching Ban Phon Sung along the track that led across the fields into the village. Normally one of their number at least was the son of a member of the village. He would bring with him friends that he had made at his school, in his job or in the army. They might bring with them a bottle of rice whisky and perhaps some meat from the market. Otherwise they would buy a chicken from a villager and the boy from the village would get his mother and sisters to prepare a good meal, suggesting to his sisters that they should fetch over some of their girl-friends to give them a hand with the cooking. If there turned out to be a festival at one of the neighbouring villages in the evening, so much the better. The boys could continue their weekend's entertainment there. If not, the local boy might organise some fishing for his friends the following morning, and the rest of the time could be spent wandering around the village visiting uncles and aunts who were known for their attractive daughters. Thus, the range of young men who might come into contact with the girls of a village like Ban Phon Sung had been greatly expanded in recent years. Boys who had gone into town for their education were introducing into the village boys who came from the other end of the country. Marriages were beginning to take place with people from hundreds of miles away.

There were a number of consequences of these developments: first, the criteria by which a prospective husband was to be judged suitable were inevitably adapted. Villagers were used to conducting almost formal assessments of a marriage candidate's suitability. I have been

present when the intermediary of a boy's family called at the girl's house. The father immediately sent his daughter to her room and sent a son out to convene the most important uncles and cousins in the village. The intermediary was then asked to state his business and the matter was discussed in detail. In the village the only considerations which were seriously discussed were those of character and moral standing. Was the boy a good worker, did he drink too much, was he known to be a gambler, did he have a quick temper, was he in good health, what were his parents like? If he did not intend to farm the land, what did he intend to do? In cases where the boy was from the village or from a neighbouring village, the information was probably already well known to at least some of those gathered round. If it was not, then one of the uncles might suggest that he could talk with his friend X who lived in the same village as the prospective groom's family. The intention would be to find out whether there was anything in the past which might constitute an objection, a bū'ang lang (the side behind). This might refer to the young man specifically, if he was known to be in debt, or was being pursued by a family who claimed he was the father of their daughter's child, or if he had been involved in fights while drunk; or it might refer to the family as a whole; if they were in a dispute over land, the parents were divorced, or there was known to be a hereditary disease in the family. Essentially they were looking for negative features which might disqualify the boy. Positive qualifications, such as his wealth, his education or his religious training would be mentioned, but a lack of these would not be enough to reject him, and they would only come into play at the next stage, when the amount of the bride-wealth was being considered.

Problems, however, arose, when the boy came from far away and

there was no way in which such an investigation could be carried out. A typical case was where a young soldier from Pakse got the father of one of his colleagues in Vientiane to act as his 'father' during the negotiations with the parents of a girl in a village in the Plain. The girl's parents were unable to make the usual investigation into his background and his 'father' had only met him the week before, but the family were reluctant to reject him, since their daughter wanted the marriage, and the man appeared to have a reasonable job. In any case the basic principle of rural marriage is that the choice is left to the young people. Boys' parents expect to be consulted in their son's choice of wife, but they do not expect to be able to dissuade him if his mind is made up. With girls there was more control, although they could always refuse their parents' choice - if they could resist the persuasion. Unless she was willing to elope, however, a girl could be prevented from marrying the man of her choice if her parents disapproved. Normally this would only be in the case of a long-standing dispute between the families involved, or if the boy had acquired a particularly unfortunate reputation. If parents feel obliged to reject one candidate, they normally try to have another available immediately, for they have a great fear that their daughters will reproach them permanently if they reject one suitor, only to find no others are forthcoming.

The cultural content of courtship practices has changed, some might say lessened. In the villages around Vientiane few people seemed to be proficient any more in the local traditional singing style of improvised repartee, the khap ngu'm. The boys who came round to visit were more likely to be carrying a guitar than a khāen, and the songs were modern ones popularised over the radio by nationally known artists. Nevertheless courtship remained the principal theme of modern cultural activities, both at the level of a new national

popular culture, introducing new songs, a popular theatre and written literature, available to the villager in the form of radio plays, and at the level of participation in cultural activities at village festivals.

It was a common complaint among the older men in Ban Phon Sung that the village bun (festival) was not what it used to be, that the whole thing had got out of hand. Changes in the format had had a pronounced effect on courtship patterns.

The new style bun, the development of which villagers dated back to the first general election campaign in 1947, had as its main aim the raising of money for some village construction project, almost invariably the temple, the school or the dispensary. Whereas before that date the bun was an expression of the prestige of the host village, which did its best to earn a reputation for hospitality - thereby perhaps increasing the attractiveness of its young people as marriage partners - by 1972 it had become an occasion for extracting money from visitors for the benefit of individuals and of the community as a whole. Where the village girls had previously set up stands with sweetmeats to attract the boys, now they sold alcoholic drinks within an enclosure at prices which ensured them a 200% profit. The attraction was that one could not easily take part in the dancing unless seated within the enclosure, and one could not sit in the enclosure except at a table where a couple of village girls would try to persuade you to drink as much as possible. The sweets and fried chicken were being sold outside the enclosure by the girls' mothers and their 10 year old sisters, but a boy who wanted to dance with his favourite girl had to have money, or have managed to attach himself to somebody who had money. The result was that the nature of the interaction between boys and girls during these festivals was greatly altered. The traditional cour d'

amour was rarely found for the very simple reason that it would have been quite inaudible above the noise of the heavily amplified orchestra and its loudspeakers, which accompanied the dancing. While at most festivals there were side-shows, often featuring professional performances of traditional type singing or theatre, or films presented by the information service, at some buns virtually the only activity was the dancing, performed to traditional tunes played by a modern band with guitars and drums. The dancing was organised as follows: a man paid the organisers for a round. They noted down the music he requested, the person in whose honour the round was to be danced, and the name of the girl who was chosen to lead the dancing. When their turn came, the announcer called the girl's name (invariably one of those running a stall within the enclosure). The girl came up on to the stage and was given a set of flower garlands which she in turn presented to the man in whose honour the dance had been requested. The man returned one of the garlands to the girl, meaning he invited her to dance with him, and then distributed the remaining garlands among his male friends, who in turn offered them to the girls they wished to invite to dance. The music started, the dance took place and everyone returned to their places.

There were several consequences of this new system: first, girls could earn quite large sums of money in the course of a three-day festival, but the actual amounts differed enormously, depending on the popularity of the girls. It was not unusual to see the table manned by a couple of especially pretty girls completely bare of drinks at the end of the evening, while others might have had no customers at all. Secondly, the prettiest girls were likely to be pursued by wealthy officers, civil servants, merchants or politicians from the capital. Such attachments created a dilemma in the village. On the one hand

one was tempted to encourage the liaison because it meant the village acquired an influential and wealthy protector who could be prodded into assisting in times of need. On the other hand one was sorry for the girl herself, since the men concerned were often old enough to be their fathers, and were already married. But what could one do? It would be unwise to risk the wrath of an important man by rejecting his advances, but the parents were often aware that the liaison could well prove temporary and that they might be left with little more than an unhappy, unmarriageable daughter when the affair was over. Obviously, such attachments were not very common, but they were frequent enough to be regular topics of conversation and debate. A few brief examples will give the flavour:

A. The story was told with some amusement of a man in the next village who had been befriended by an old Frenchman. When the Frenchman came to visit him in his village, he took a fancy to the man's daughter who was only 18 and asked to marry her. The man was in a dilemma. The daughter did not wish to marry the old Frenchman, but the man did not feel able to reject outright the request of his friend who had been good to him over a long period. So he thought to escape honourably by asking a ridiculously high bride-price and saying that the amount had been fixed by his relatives. To his consternation the Frenchman paid up, married the girl, but, fortunately or not, only survived one year of marriage before dying, leaving the girl eventually free to marry again.

B. A district police officer was paying assiduous court to a pretty village girl. The officer's wife, of a jealous disposition, became furious with the girl, accusing her of bewitching her husband and threatening her with summary justice. In this case the officer and his wife were both condemned by popular opinion, the one for continuing a liaison which endangered the safety of the girl, and the other for allowing jealousy to turn her crazy.

C. A civil servant friend in Vientiane invited me to accompany him and another friend to a village some 30 miles from the city. Here there lived a girl who used to bring produce into the Vientiane market regularly and had been befriended by his wife, who also sold at the market. When the girl needed to stay overnight in the capital, she stayed at their house. One night, returning home drunk, he found his wife was away visiting relatives, while the girl happened to be staying the night. She did not resist his advances, indeed the meetings recurred. Our visit to the village was necessary to 'sort things out'. When we arrived, the girl was not back from a visit to another village, but we were entertained by the parents. The father greeted me with apparent pleasure and upon hearing that I was unmarried, said that his daughter would be ideal for me, and that the bride-wealth would be only 150,000 kip (moderate-high at the time). Later, when the alcohol began to have an effect, he

admitted that he knew my friend was in love with his daughter, but he was not about to allow her to become a junior wife to an already married man. In fact my friend confided that the girl wished to marry him, indeed even considered herself to be already married to him, and that her father would really have been quite pleased for the match to go ahead, but the problem was that he did not have the means to consider setting up a second household, even if his wife would have agreed. The question for him was how to extract himself from the situation with honour and without so hurting the girl that she would come and make a scene in front of his wife if he rejected her. Her parents, meanwhile, clearly feeling that her reputation was in danger and sensing that there was not much to be gained from pressing my friend, had in fact forbidden her to travel to Vientiane.

A few weeks later the crisis peaked with the girl announcing she was pregnant (an alarm that subsequently proved to be false) and the showdown with his wife could not be avoided. A solemn undertaking to break the liaison restored marital harmony and the fact that the girl proved not to be pregnant will have allowed her to resume a fairly normal village life.

Following the belief that situations in which conflict is present, although not necessarily typical, can tell us much about attitudes and cultural perspectives, it seems worth trying to look more deeply at some of the elements present in these stories.

The first point to note is the part that is played in all these cases by piap, the concept approximating to honour, status and amour-propre. In story A the father is loathe to force his daughter to marry the old man, but is keen not to cause his friend to lose piap by having his request refused. He seeks to provide a way out by naming a ridiculously high price which will allow the old man to withdraw his request, not because he has been rejected, but because of a clearly unacceptable condition. The old man chooses to misunderstand his friend.

In story B the policeman's wife has lost piap because her husband finds other charms more attractive, and is trying to recover it by suggesting that unless magic had been used to turn his mind he never would have done such a thing. In story C everyone is in danger of

losing piap and realises it. The father tries to preserve his by pretending that he is preventing the marriage of his daguther to an already married man. The girl is in danger of losing her piap irrevocably, since she has given herself to a man without hope of obtaining anything in return. The civil servant realises the danger that a person in such a state represents, and tries desperately to find a way of preventing her from feeling so depressed that she will be ready to take violent action.

A second element that can be drawn from these stories is the importance of appearances. The moral imperatives on people apply in theory to all action, but in practice to action in public or which becomes public knowledge. The fury of the police officer's wife was probably not so much that her husband was having an affair on the side, but because he did it so obviously. Indeed it may have been the apparently innocent remark of a neighbour noting that she had seen the woman's husband in the girl's house which would compel a reaction from the wronged wife, since she could no longer feign ignorance. Similarly, friends would tell me that it did not really matter much if their wife proved not to be a virgin on marriage, but it would be intolerable if it was known in her village, for example, that the family had managed to con him into thinking that she was pure and unsullied.

Thirdly, there is apparent confirmation that the man plays the active role in courtship, the woman the passive one, but there are signs this may not be so simple as it seems. Because the woman is essentially passive, it does not mean she has no piap. In fact the whole institution of courtship, from both the male and the female point of view, has been described to me as a means of trying to gain as much piap as you can, while giving away as little as possible. The man most obviously gains piap if he acquires a husband's rights

over an attractive, hard-working, generally admired wife. For this acquisition he must pay bride-wealth which he will try to fix as low as possible. He must try not to lose more than absolutely necessary in terms of revealing his attraction to the girl. To be attracted by the girl is a victory for her and a potential loss of piap for him. But the problem is he cannot expect her to accept him if he does not admit his own weakness (the term is used precisely) for her. For the girl, to have many suitors is a gain in piap, but she is highly vulnerable. Whereas the boy can put down any weakness on his part to a passing fancy and move on, she has only to succumb to her feelings once for her reputation to be in danger. The ideal of course is for the whole process to be khū' (harmonious, appropriate), for each person to gain pretty well what he loses, probably in another form, so that balance and harmony are maintained; but the ideal is recognised as an extremely tricky path in this particular field, where the temptation to try to gain something for nothing is often intense.

What do young people look for in each other when they set out to find a mate? A woman of about 50 in Ban Phon Sung summed up the views of many older villagers when she noted that when she was a girl all the boys had claimed to be former monks of high status, since a girl would be impressed by the prestige such a qualification would imply, and probably feel the man was reliable. Her own husband had claimed to be a former monk of chān rank,[1] and she had fallen for it, whereas anyone with any sense would have seen that he had never set foot inside a monastery! But now, girls just looked for the ones who had money or a job in Vientiane, though what they thought they were after she could not imagine. Men, on the other hand, were still looking for the same women they had always wanted: hard-working,

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1. Chān indicates a former full monk with one promotion.

pleasant personality, a good mother.

The problem in recent years has of course been that the disruption of social units in the rural areas, as a result of the war and of the impact of modern material goods, has also affected such apparently independent activities as courtship. More and more, men are coming from outside the area in which village elders can apply social controls to woo girls in the villages. The dangers are therefore increased that girls will get pregnant without having a husband (for there is no pressure the elders can bring on the outsider), that wives will be abandoned having produced a child, and that the undesirable characteristics of a man will be discovered after the marriage has taken place.

It is my feeling that rural elders have reacted by sticking more to the letter of the law in terms of moral freedoms for girls than they used to in the past, and indeed that high moral principles will be invoked when a stranger comes to call, which might be thought superfluous if the suitor is an eligible cousin. At the same time the processes of courtship have been altered by the introduction of financial considerations. An attractive daughter can earn considerable sums at festivals selling drinks to urban visitors, but she must be preserved as well, so that at the appropriate moment the greatest financial bonus of all, a high bride-wealth, can be collected. The girl, however, risks being seduced by the talk with which her suitors regale her, of air-conditioned houses, motor-cars, domestic servants in the town, in exchange for this hard rural life.

At the other end of the scale a girl with some modern education may feel that the passive role she is required by convention to adopt is boring and demeaning, and she may take on an unattractive aggressive-

ness which alienates her from her village. I observed a number of such cases: one girl in a village in the Vientiane plain was introduced to me at a festival and struck me as surprisingly attractive to be unmarried in her middle twenties, which was the age she had clearly reached. Eventually, after considerable prodding of people from her village, the following story was told: one day, at a festival, one of the village's most respected elder men, who had a well-tolerated weakness for wine and pretty women, asked her if there was any more whisky. It can be assumed that she had drunk a fair amount herself in toasts while serving the men, but her reply was unexpected. She said there was no more whisky, but if the old man wished it she would piss into the bottle she was holding. This remark ended her immediate marriage prospects, for the old man in question was the father of the village's most eligible bachelor, and the match had looked a distinct possibility up to that time. Not only did she lose that boy, but nobody in the village would dare to marry their son to her, for fear, one imagines, of the ridicule of the old man. When I asked whether spinsterhood for life was not a rather savage punishment for one remark, people said it was only one example of her bad character, but I was not convinced. A Lao friend who accompanied me to the village had been lavish in her praises after one evening in her company, but when my suspicions, simply on the basis of her age, were confirmed by hearing the story, my friend suddenly remembered some remarks or gestures she had made which clearly revealed her genuinely bad character! I did not get to know any of the protagonists well enough to be able to form a more precise opinion of the case. In any event the story is interesting as an example of the sort of behaviour about which any Lao would say "No Lao girl would ever say that".

One of the saddest cases I came across was in a village not far

from Vientiane. Invited to lunch there by a friend, we were soon joined by a girl cousin of his of about 20. On hearing that her cousin had a foreign guest she had come straight over to join us and immediately started chatting away in a loud and brazen way. She drank heavily throughout the meal and her make-up and westernised dress clashed with the surroundings. When the other women cleared away the dishes, she remained chatting to the men. After the meal she invited us over to visit her family house, where her father, apparently one of the district's most knowledgeable Buddhist laymen, sat quietly bewildered at his daughter's behaviour. Later, I discovered that she had done quite well at school, then got a job as a secretary at the provincial army headquarters, a position from which I was assured it was impossible for a girl to emerge with her virtue intact, and later became the mistress of a general, having at one stage been a high-class prostitute in Vientiane. I met her years later in an airport lounge where she was waiting for a flight to return to her general (who had children older than she was), and the expression of despair, the plea for understanding and compassion that was written on her face, was touching.

My picture of modern rural courtship is unbalanced, as I have concentrated on the problems and conflicts, and not sufficiently emphasised the cases where harmony is achieved without fuss or drama. I shall try to right the balance in my discussion of marriage.

Modern urban courtship

Boy to girl: "These cakes are as delicious as the baker is beautiful".

Girl to boy: "My parents said the coconuts you brought were sweet, but I found the taste bitter - bitter as the heart of the person who brought them".

At a party in Vientiane in 1972 celebrating the 21st birthday of the daughter of a wealthy civil servant, I fell into conversation with a girl student of about 17, herself a general's daughter. She asked me if I was going to write about the position of women in Lao society, since if I was interested, she had some thoughts on the subject. A girl's life in Laos was very difficult. Parental control was extremely strict. If you wanted to go out with a boy, you had to have known him for at least a year, and your parents must trust him implicitly before they would let you go out with him. If she herself wanted to go anywhere, she had to be accompanied by her elder sister and driven by her brother, and he decided when they went home. Boys had much greater freedom. They could go out when and where they wanted without their parents saying anything, though if they wanted to take a girl to the cinema, they could often end up paying for her entire family as well. In the country, though, it was different. Everybody knew everybody else in the village and trusted one another. Girls had more freedom. They could go off to pick fruit in groups in the forest, and if they met a boy on the way, one of the girls could always lag behind to talk to him. She would be interested to read a comparison of girls' lives in Laos and Europe. Families who had lived in Europe for a long time seemed to be freer with their daughters, but that did not protect them from the gossip that resulted.

This girl's complaints about her lot touch on a number of the features which distinguish rural from urban courtship. The first group of features refer to the urban quest for social status.

Marriage in urban Laos was seen, by the elite at least, as an alliance, not merely between two individuals, but between two families, and as such the definition of what was an appropriate (khū') marriage included the question of membership of a status group.

The aim of an urban parent who has daughters is to marry them as advantageously as possible, in financial terms, in terms of useful political alliance, and in terms of gains in traditional status or piap. On the whole these aims can be made to coincide conveniently, but there are situations in which advantage in one sense is loss in another; such a case is when an attractive offer is received from a rich Chinese businessman. Financial gain can be expected both immediately and in long-term support, but the gain in status, if the girl is from an elite Lao family, is achieved by the businessman at the expense of his Lao father-in-law. The case of a girl requested in marriage by a foreigner is similar, though that has the increased disadvantage of probable long absences overseas.

My informant's description of the relative freedom enjoyed by boys would suggest that parents either do not particularly care who their sons marry or feel that it is useless to try and influence the choice. Both factors are probably relevant. Sons are looking for wives who will keep house, raise a family and look after their husbands loyally and without a fuss. These characteristics are not much influenced by status background. What I have termed 'alliance' may not after all represent the joining of two equal sides. Marriage would seem to create obligations in the husband towards his wife's family which are not felt by the wife or her family towards the husband's family. This may be linked to the practice of matrilocal residence which brings the husband into his wife's household or more simply to the view of marriage as a man supporting his wife and her immediate kin. The remark that the boy is expected to buy cinema tickets for his girl-friend and her family is significant in this context.

The admission that parents can have little control over the

behaviour of their sons is important, and here one is reminded of the theme present in rural attitudes - the man as an adventurer, the one who operates outside the home, the potential founder of a new village. Status questions provide potential for conflict in courtship if a girl loves a boy of inferior status and not the reverse. The rich boy can always defy his parents and take an illiterate peasant for his wife, or he can install her as his mistress or minor wife, mia nōi - 'little wife'. The rich girl who loves a boy of poor background is doomed, and this is a favourite theme of modern cultural forms.

The traditional link between cultural activities and courtship in the rural areas has been noted, and the introduction of modern expressions of this link described. Developments have been even more radical in the urban context. The cinema in particular has had a remarkable impact. There is no serious Lao film industry. All films are imported and can be divided into Indian (romantic love-stories), Chinese (traditional martial arts and modern social dramas), Thai (modern social dramas often incorporating supernatural elements) and Western adventure stories or slapstick comedies. Of these the Indian, the Thai and the Chinese modern dramas have clearly influenced the way young people view courtship, love and marriage. Both the Chinese and Indian films frequently feature an arranged marriage which breaks the heart of a young couple tenderly in love, and therefore regularly treat the theme of the conflict between family loyalty and personal preference. I do not think it totally unreasonable to suggest that such cultural models may equally have influenced Lao urban parents into an appreciation of the advantages of the arranged marriage, because it seems arguable that in traditional Lao society personal preference was almost invariably respected except among the aristocracy.

But the cinema has had an impact on courtship beyond that of its

themes. Going to the cinema has become an institutional part of the courtship proceedings. To this effect the weekend matinee shows are particularly popular. The acceptance of an invitation to the cinema and its authorisation by the girl's parents is the first concession that the girl makes in her relationship with the boy. In fact it fits harmoniously into the Lao conception of balance in courtship, for the boy gains piap in being seen with his girl in a public place, but the girl compensates for that by the fact that he pays and that anyway she has one or more relatives accompanying her. The boy's aim is to get to a point where she is allowed to go to the cinema alone, or at least with another girl friend for whom he can provide a willing male escort.

Modern Chinese and Indian films both treat the problem of the adoption by young Asians of western cultural models and standards of interpersonal behaviour. Young Lao are influenced in other ways than by the cinema. To take a simple example, the teachers at Vientiane secondary schools are predominantly French. Lao children have been taught from their primary schools to respect their teachers. When, therefore, a young person sees his teacher holding hands with his girl-friend or even kissing her in public, it obviously influences his thinking. If he asks his parents about it, they will say that the teacher does it because that is the custom in France, but it would be quite wrong in Laos. However well this point is made, though, the problem arises of identifying logically what part of the foreigner's teaching and example are 'good to be learnt' and what parts are 'bad', and by what criteria the distinction is to be made.

Dancing is another problem area. In Vientiane, dancing took place in three situations: at festivals, at parties in private houses, and in night-clubs. A distinction was also made between three types

of dance: Lao (in which you circle the floor without touching your partner), fast modern (twist or shake etc. - in which the music and rhythm are foreign, but you do not touch your partner) and slow modern (in which you hold your partner). The aim of a young man was to dance a 'slow' with his girl-friend. This had to be resisted by the girl, initially at least, as it was a sign of decadence and represented a step forward in the relationship which took it out of traditional cultural classification, for a Lao couple, even if married, would never normally be seen to touch each other in public. There was a real sense in which young people saw such an intimacy as a first step towards proving that they were not to be bound by 'traditional Lao customs' and had on the contrary embraced the modern, in this case Western world. Ironically, some of these 'traditional Lao customs' may be quite recent derivations of aristocratic or even non-Lao cultural models introduced to satisfy the needs of an emerging elite. As my student informant noted, "girls are much freer in the villages". One wonders whether girls in traditional towns were any less free than their rural cousins, apart from the immediate female relatives of the king, who, as the Thai evidence particularly shows, were in a thoroughly special category.

It is worth considering the effect of education on relations between young people and especially on courtship. Table 29 shows the numbers of boys and girls in the different types of schools in 1973 and the percentage of the total that girls represented:

Table 29 Numbers of pupils and students in Laos in 1973[1]

Type of school	Boys	Girls	%	Total
Primary	148,316	92,038	(38%)	240,354
Private (Primary & Secondary)	23,630	16,956	(42%)	40,586
Secondary	6,468	2,254	(26%)	8,722
Teacher training	2,837	1,194	(30%)	4,031
Fine Arts	201	82	(29%)	283
Technical	1,001	117	(10%)	1,118
University	525	100	(16%)	625
	182,978	112,741		295,719

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While the most remarkable feature of this chart is the tiny numbers who reach secondary and higher levels, it will be noted that the proportion of girls, which begins at 38%, gradually decreases until it is down to 16% in the university.[2]

A few girls do reach the highest levels of the system. These are invariably from the elite. Respondents to interview in rural and urban areas were unanimous that the education of sons was more important than that of daughters. In the villages there were those who felt that all education for women was unnecessary. This view was rarely held in the towns. In response to the question, "To what level would you like your children to study?" the most common response was to name a point for the girls (End of Primary or middle of Secondary) and to wish for the boys to go on as far as their talents allowed.

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1. Adapted from Royaume du Laos (1973).

2. The relatively high proportion of girls in private schools is due to the majority of pupils being the children of foreigners.

One of the results of the spread of at least a basic education for both boys and girls was the development of the art of letter-writing as a part of courtship. It became something of a speciality. In these letters sentiments could be expressed which the person would never dare to speak, especially if truly private meetings were impossible. As had been the case with village love-songs, those who had a talent for the art were on hand to help those who felt they had none. It was not considered cheating to have a friend draft one's love letters, and those who wrote poetry were especially in demand.

What seems to have been taking place, then, over a short space of time, is the development of new concepts and ideas both in the pursuit of 'love', on the one hand, and the search for a marriage partner on the other. Whereas one usually led to the other in village society, urban society had been influenced by various cultural currents, Lao aristocratic, Thai administration/commerce, Indian practice etc., which promoted the idea of marriage for reasons other than personal attraction. At the same time, however, young people were being educated at school in a cultural tradition which saw marriage as the inevitable fulfilment of love. It is not surprising that the period saw much confusion and distress among young people. A few brief, not necessarily typical, case histories may give more of the flavour:

A. An attractive girl from a provincial town had come to the capital to live with her uncle who was a chemist. She helped him run a private pharmacy. When she was serving the pharmacy was always full of customers who found it a pleasant place to obtain their medicines. She was particularly courted by a young Lao student and an older Chinese merchant. The Lao student pressed his suit in the accepted manner of visits to her house, exchange of letters, occasional picnics in large groups on a Sunday. The Chinese merchant, however, set out to ingratiate himself with the family. Most notably he asked the girl's elder brother, himself an impecunious student, to give him lessons in Lao writing and spoken English, for which he paid an exceptionally generous rate. Once when the brother was in urgent need of funds, the merchant helped him

out with an unrepayable loan. Soon the merchant was ready to make a formal request of marriage. The girl's uncle sent word to her parents and her mother travelled down. The question that was put was, "Is there any reason why you wish to refuse the Chinese merchant?" The student boy-friend, with whom she was by then in love, indicated he was ready to come forward with an offer, but he had just been awarded a scholarship for five years' study in Japan, and she would have to wait for him. Pressure was put on the girl from all sides. Crucially perhaps, her elder brother, who could have been expected to take her side, was obliged to support the Chinese merchant owing to his financial debt. Still, it was felt she could have refused, but since she did not dislike the man, and it obviously meant so much to her family, she agreed in the end and married the merchant. The disappointed student attended the wedding.

B. The daughter of a rich civil servant was in love with the son of a regional politician of good standing, but despite several years of courtship the girl's father remained opposed to the match, reportedly because the boy's health was bad (he had had TB), and because his parents were divorced, which augured badly for the future. Then both girl and boy obtained scholarships for further education in France. At the end of the first year the girl's father suggested to his daughter that she fly home for a visit, but she discovered that the intention was to marry her off then and there to a middle-aged politician whose wife had just died. She pleaded an excuse for not returning and during the second year got pregnant with her boyfriend. On hearing the news, the girl's father finally gave his blessing to the match, and they were married.

These examples are taken, as indeed most of the discussion of urban courtship has been, from observations among the elite and from the families of other civil servants, military officers, politicians, professional men and merchants. This group, while subdivided within itself in terms of wealth, rank and educational attainment, did, however, constitute a surprisingly high percentage of the ethnic Lao population of Vientiane. The manual worker or domestic servant was generally from an ethnic minority or an immigrant from Thailand or even Vietnam. Among the poorer Lao immigrants to Vientiane, behaviour was less likely to be influenced by foreign models and considerations of financial gain, though, as noted above, the fabric of village social controls was severely tested by the poverty and anonymity of social life in the urban slums.

Marriage

(a) The Marriage Ceremony

The Lao marriage ceremonies which I observed, whether simple affairs in a small village, or huge social events with princes, princesses and the diplomatic corps, did not differ as rituals except for minor regional variations and the idiosyncracies of individual officiants. The description which follows is therefore a composite one and would I think be accepted by any Lao.

On the day and at the time fixed in the negotiations, after consulting the astrologers, the groom sets out from his house accompanied by his retinue of friends and relatives, among whom he has chosen one friend to be his 'best man', bāo khōei. When they arrive at the door of the girl's house, they find the way barred by the bride's relatives, particularly the old women, who demand to know what the group thinks it is doing all dressed up. Banter ensues, ending with a payment by the groom to the doorkeeper which ensures entry. Rice whisky is dispensed amid ribald comments to the groom's party. The number of people who actually attend the marriage ceremony depends very often on the size of the room, but the minimum is the groom and his best man, the bride and her bridesmaid, one or two mǭ phǭn (officiants), the parents of the two people or their representatives and one or two respected elders and relatives. Brothers and sisters of the bride especially are often too busy with preparing the food and organising the reception to attend.

The groom and his best man are seated in front of two large bowls each containing a tower of flowers topped by a candle, onto which have been attached cotton strings linking the two towers. When the bride and her bridesmaid have come in and sat down, the mǭ phǭn takes up

position on the other side of the bowls, lights the candles, and the ceremony called sūkhuan can begin.[1]

The sūkhuan ceremony, in one form or another, constitutes the centre of every Lao rite of passage. Sūkhuan means to invite the 'spirit-souls', that is, to inform the 32 'souls' which reside in each person's body that an important change in their situation is taking place. In order that they shall not take offence at this change, they must be called back to participate in the ceremony. The mǭ phǭn, having begun with a short Pali prayer, proceeds to call in the souls of the couple in a chanted invocation. An accomplished mǭ phǭn provides exceptional entertainment, and if a reputed practitioner is to perform, people will crowd in to hear him. The text below is taken from a collection of traditional texts, edited by the Comité Littéraire under the title Paphēnī būrān[2] (Ancient traditions). It is similar to versions I recorded in village and town ceremonies, but more complete. It will be noted that the mǭ phǭn is assuming patrilocal residence after marriage.

Text of marriage sūkhuan

Today is a good day, a day during the waxing moon, particularly auspicious. The offering tray is of sandalwood, the offering bowl is of the finest silver. The elders have prepared the ceremony, they have cooperated to prepared the 'tray for the souls' (phā khuan). There is cotton for tying on the wrists, rings for the little fingers, jewelled beads as used by royalty, every kind of food in excessive abundance, betel ready prepared for chewing. They have hurried to prepare flowers of the most fragrant and beautiful blooms - a small bottle of alcohol has been placed on the tray. They have invited many people to come and join in. There are rice cakes and fine bananas, cooked eggs in perfect condition. The highest divinities from the heavenly world, Lord Si and Lord Phan, purveyors of beautiful and pure objects, have come to give their approval and good wishes to this ceremony. Their guarantee of good fortune is good for a year.

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1. The role of the best man and bridesmaid is said to be to confuse the evil spirits, who might otherwise try to possess the couple. In some cases the bride-wealth is handed over and counted at this point. In others this has happened previously, although always in front of witnesses.

2. Comité Littéraire (1969).

This woman is an appropriate wife for this man according to ancient principles. When you pay homage to your senior relatives, you must hold the bowl full of flowers right up to your eyes. The traditional silver money demanded for the hand of the eldest daughter is received, the large bride-wealth requested for the middle and youngest daughters will be accorded without fail. The elders of the two parties have come together and prepared the match at the time of the productive showers of the New Year, of the warning thunder of the third month. The groom's side has come to talk to the side of the precious and beautiful girl, so that they will never separate, so that the match will produce an alliance full of love, so that the daughter-in-law may be happy to stay with her father-in-law. You (girl) already know the words of teaching addressed to a beloved child, so there are sweet smelling flowers, an excessive abundance of things to welcome you with. The elders, parents, boys and girls of an acceptable age have come to assist you to raise your phā khuan on your left side and your right side. That group over there is ready to pour the whisky for the old men seated in the positions of seniority. Now I am going to call your soul to come into your body and remain there. I shall call the soul of the beautiful bride to come into her body at the same time as your soul, you who are the husband - come, soul euy! Come joyfully now, precious souls. When you arrive, cut some Khum Fum flowers. The blooms which are just opening are Khad Khao flowers. The girl's pretty hair just touches her shoulder (it's the right length). Souls, come into this man on this good day. The beautiful souls of you two people, may they come together to your bodies. Today, soul of the lower leg, come into the lower leg. Soul of the upper leg, come into the upper leg. Come to your places and rest. At the time chosen for taking a journey, choose that moment for the young man's procession. On a day of joyful coming together (day of communal work), have the young man walk in procession up to the bride's house. Go according to the Dharma's provisions, and do not choose the moment and the fateful direction of the Royal Spirit's wanderings, but choose the time appropriate to processing the feet, head and tail of the Naga. When the groom arrives, have an appropriate seat prepared for him. The Thevada (divinities) have sent these two people down to be born and come together as a couple.

Your parents and the elders have tied on the strings to confirm that you are a couple, so that you, girl, have become the child of the father-in-law, planted as a young shoot in the house. You two youngest, the light in your parents' eyes (youngest, most prized) are loved equally. Now I shall invite the souls of the groom to come into his fresh-skinned untainted body, which is appropriate for the beautiful girl who is here waiting. Indra has arranged that you should come to be with your wife and love her until old age, a hundred years of long life. You should have many children, daughters and sons. May you have 100,000 servants. May your heavenly inheritance be complete, elephants, horses with golden saddles. May you be respected as a Lord of Buddhist learning who has great power and influence for good, as is spoken in the ancient teachings. Indra has offered his wishes as teachings to this world. The offering tray and bowl of finest silver for receiving the souls are as beautiful as if a heavenly maiden had prepared them. Indra has sent the flowers placed in the bride's hair. I shall invite the souls of both of you to come now, soul euy! At the time when the sun is setting and night is near, at the time when the red sun has fallen behind the trees, may the soul of the bride come into her body without delay. Your mother has prepared your room already. There is a new sheet and a many-patterned

cover to the mattress, which has been woven with red silk until it is as brilliant as a precious stone. Souls which are so precious, come into the bodies of this couple. Your souls which have wandered a great distance, have them return today. Your soul which is still thinking about your former boyfriends, have it return today, come here, soul euy! Wash your hair and cut Buarapha flowers to put in your bun. Then put on the sandalwood perfume which your mother has prepared. Then cut flowers to beautify your head. If your hair is not long, then add a wig. Friends of the groom, relatives in the southern part of the village are waiting. The most beautiful girls in the northern part of the village have come to look at the bride's face. People everywhere are saying that you (the bride) have much merit. Come and eat your lunch at the offering tray that has just been prepared. The elders will put the eggs on your offering trays into your mouths, as tradition dictates. The celebrant tells us that today is a good day. I shall take both of you to lie together on the mattress with your heads on the pillows. You two shall take over the responsibilities in the house from your parents, at the time when the thunder rolls and the rain begins to fall. On the eighth day you shall observe the Buddhist holy day. On the 14th and 15th days you should be pleased to offer food to the monks and in this never fail. According to the words of the celebrant, may the soul of the eyebrows come back to the eyebrows and stay put. May the soul of the eyes come back to the eyes. Souls of the mouth, the cheeks, the chin, soul of the waist and soul of the breast together, I request you to come around the offering tray, come, souls, euy! Today is a good day a day of celebration. Old people are transformed into maidens on this day. Servants are transformed into house-owners on this day. When you sleep you will have ten thousand pieces of silver on this day. When you wake up you will have a hundred thousand pieces of silver. In three days' time may you be brought priceless stones. Within five days may you be brought fine clothes to wear. The pair of you must stay together in happiness and health. You must act respectfully and humbly towards your parents on both sides. You are the son-in-law, you must act generously. Do not be loud-mouthed in your pride. When you chase chickens, you should shout "So!" When chasing dogs, you should shout "Se!" When chasing buffaloes, you should shout "Heu!" Don't behave or speak in an unseemly fashion in front of your wife's relatives. Don't be hasty or scornful in criticism of them. You should be pure and clear-hearted in your relations with your wife. You (girl) are the daughter-in-law. You should love your husband's mother. Don't damage the reputation of your husband or go flirting with other men. You know the teachings of the monks. When it gets dark, you must not go out to amuse yourself outside the house. That small house over there is the house of your husband's younger brother. The big house with the high gables and the plank which protects the roofing from the wind is his father's house. The house next to it which has a veranda is the house of his father's elder brother and his wife. The large house in front with a roof support as fine as a girl's arm, with a sculptured Naga on the wall, with prefectly planed beams and a roof of earthen tiles, has an elevated room to catch the cool breeze. It has a fine stable for horses with their bell collars. It has a jar for water which is as clear as if it came from a river bed full of jewels. That house has been given by the father to you, the new couple. You should come and make merit with no shortage of things to do it with. May you live long enough to construct many things. When you have meat to eat, send some over to your husband's sister's house. When you have fish, send some to your husband's mother. People will say that you have a generous and

meritorious heart towards your relatives. When you have a son, may he be a splendid boy. May you have a child like a jewel born in your womb. You should listen to the advice of your father-in-law's parents. Have a generous attitude to all your relatives. Don't turn your left eye to look at the boys. Don't turn your right eye to look for any boyfriends. In the evening you must fetch the food tray. In the morning you must prepare the lunch tray. Don't sleep too much or get up too late, it's against the traditions. Prepare the betel nut and the tobacco in readiness. You have a husband. Throw out any old affections. Use the small jar of alcohol for serving your junior relatives. Use the large jar to serve your seniors. On this auspicious day for you, precious girl, the other celebrant will add some more wishes to those I've already expressed - these are the teachings of Indra to the world. You have good fortune already - take care of it. Come here, soul euy! Soul of the husband, come and be with your wife happily. In the evening you should go to the bedroom with your heads close together on the pillow. You must love each other permanently. You must do good actions, you will have no lack of happiness. In the evenings you should experience great ease and happiness.

Sanya tu phavang .....[1]

After this chant the mǭ phǭn leans across and ties one hand of the groom to one of the bride with the cotton strings provided. He gives an egg to each to eat, and each takes a gulp of rice whisky from a cup. Then he comes round and ties separate strings on the wrists of each person. At this point he gives personal advice to each, which roughly paraphrased contains (for the groom): look after your wife, protect her, be faithful to her, be respectful to her parents, and remember to look after them in your old age, work hard and bring up your children to respect their elders; (to the bride): look after your husband's every need in the home, see that he is well fed and clothed, receive guests with dignity and grace, so that your husband is proud to invite them to the house.

The strings are finally knotted on the wrists so that the 'souls' may be persuaded to stay in the body and the good wishes fulfilled.

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1. Comité Littéraire (1969) pp. 9-14 (my translation from the Lao).

After the mǭ phǭn has tied on his strings, others present do the same, usually contenting themselves with brief ritual expressions of good wishes. When all have done so, the mǭ phǭn in some areas close the ceremony with a last formal chant, but in others this is not done. The marriage ceremony proper is over, but there are two important attendant ceremonies to perform. The first is the sommā (homage). The new couple prostrate themselves in front of their parents with their heads resting on a cloth, the other end of which is being held or touched by their parents. They then formally request forgiveness for all the things in which they have wronged their parents in the past. The parents reply with a blessing which often concludes with one of them giving the Buddhist formula of good wishes.

The second ceremony is the civil registration of the marriage, which may be done by the Tasseng, the village headman or perhaps a teacher, and simply involves filling in a form with names, ages and so on.

As the guests assemble for the feast which follows, the couple take a tray with one glass and a bottle of alcohol, and the man pours the drink which his wife then offers to each guest.

(b) The marriage ceremony as an expression of Lao social ideals

The first object of the marriage ceremony, as in almost any culture, is to advertise, to call witnesses to the fact that a new social unit has been formed. Secondly, it signals the incorporation of new blood into existing social units - the acceptance of new in-laws. The text above makes several references to the new obligations the young people are taking on towards their parents-in-law. These social changes are most appropriately celebrated by exchange of gifts

and by eating and drinking together.

One may, however, 'take a wife' (ao mia) without getting married (tāeng ngān, kin dǭng). A couple may call each other phua (husband) and mia (wife) by setting up house together, or even by just sleeping together once. Their union may or may not cause social problems. If the people are poor and there is no question of rights of property, then a commitment to hold a sūkhuan ceremony when they can afford it will usually be accepted. In the case of the daughter of an official, informal cohabitation is shocking, unacceptable, against the traditions, but most particularly a defiance of parental authority. Such objections on the grounds of cultural principles can be seen to be fundamentally based on finance and status considerations. The marriage ceremony allows complex questions of bride-wealth payments and inheritance to be settled, and allows prestige and status to be acquired, both through the linking of two families, politically and economically, and through the display of hospitality which the ceremony encourages. If a girl starts producing children without allowing these questions to be settled, then conflict is likely.

The marriage ceremony is not therefore essential for the creation of a new social unit. It is recognised that the decision of two people to live together and have children is enough to achieve this. The negotiations which precede the ceremony are necessary, however, for the orderly transfer of wealth, participation at the ceremony is required to witness the details of the arrangements, and the festivities which follow the ceremony give prestige to those who offer them. Prestige may also be a factor in the choice of partner, if it is desired to perpetuate or form an endogamous social group such as the modern urban elite, from which others must be excluded.

An ambiguity in the Lao marriage system may have already been noted. Bride-wealth is paid by the husband's family to the wife's, but residence is for the most part matrilocal. In other words the husband's family appears to lose its money and its son. In fact, as I have already suggested, the bride-wealth is most often a symbolic payment or, more precisely, a contribution towards the cost of the ceremony. Only in the aristocracy, where residence is patrilocal, and there is a sense in which a man is buying the rights to a woman from her family, is the bride-wealth more substantial.

What, then, is all this talk of Indra, Nagas and the Thevada? My analysis is that with them we enter the realm of the ideology of social institutions.

The ritual is a mixture of Brahman and Buddhist elements. The presence of Hindu deities, the description of the materials required for the ceremony, the calling of the souls of different parts of the body, are elements of Brahman mythology and culture. The references to 'merit', observance of Buddhist holy-days, the moral and ethical advice, and the Pali invocations which open and close the chant, are all Buddhist in inspiration.

The marriage ceremony is in fact the marriage of a prince and a princess. The couple are called chao bāo and chao sāo, which literally mean 'prince' and 'princess'. The references to servants and riches and a fine house are apt for the marriage of a Brahmin prince, but hardly for a poor Lao peasant. And yet not all the chant is merely so much fine talk. The moral advice is all on how to create harmonious relations, and the need to act in an appropriate (khū') way, even down to the accepted shouts for chasing chickens and dogs.

The mǭ phǭn learns his craft primarily in the vat during his

years as a monk. There is not therefore a clear-cut division in Lao thought between what comes from Buddhism, what from Brahmanism and what from the spirit-cult tradition.[1] All is part of a total culture, of which certain elements have a daily influence on personal behaviour, while others are the prerogative of court life, others of urban life in general, and others touch only rural areas. Some of the elements, being part of a proselytising philosophy such as Buddhism, are transmitted out from the centre in ritual such as the marriage ceremony and in the daily rites of the Buddhist temple. The ceremony of marriage, therefore, defines an ideal relationship between 'the elders' who have arranged the proceedings, the spiritual forces (Indra), who have given their approval, the mǭ phǭn who managed the spiritual forces, and the young couple who are being married. This ideal relationship is in a sense quite separate from the practical responsibilities of the various participants - the man's parents who must pay, the girl's parents who must (in the matrilocal case) accept a new member into their household, and the new couple who have to get on with each other.

In another sense, though, the ideological relationship legitimises the practical one. Spiritual forces are being invoked to sanction a social transformation. In a way it is like obtaining a guarantee for an investment. If the ceremony was carried out 'according to ancient principles', then nothing should go wrong.

The most striking example of when things did go wrong that I witnessed was at a marriage between a Lao and a Chinese girl. At the time the reception was due to begin, a tremendous storm blew up, and as the couple was running from their car into the building where the

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1. See my comments on Tambiah (1970) in Chapter Three.

reception was to be held, a huge concrete gate-post collapsed, injuring the husband so severely that he died in hospital the same night. People were immediately reminded of things that went wrong during the ceremony. Somebody had dropped a ring, the two horoscopes had not fitted, the day chosen was not an auspicious one.

Naturally the content of social institutions at the level of practice is liable to more rapid change than the ideology, as reflected in ritual. Ritual performances and ideologies such as popular Buddhism are essentially conservative forces, though also subject to change, as we have seen. The force of a conservative ideology is often most noticeable in the way people talk about social institutions. The way Lao people talked about courtship and marriage often did not accurately reflect the changes that had taken place, particularly in towns, in recent years. Language, of course, is also a relatively conservative force, which should not be allowed to mask the speed of social change. I have tried to show how the social institutions of courtship and marriage developed quite distinctly in rural and urban areas and according to status levels, without necessarily implying any such radical change in the rituals which consecrated them, nor in the language used to speak about them.

Deviant behaviour

(a) Crime

The table below, extracted from official figures of cases reported to the police, is interesting for a number of reasons:

Table 30 Cases submitted to the judicial police[1]

	1968	1971	1973	% change 1968-73
Murder	58	77	103	+ 78%
Rape	22	28	33	+ 50%
Theft	585	401	836	+ 43%
Armed robbery	20	13	52	+160%
Drug trafficking	4	35	5	
Gambling	16	40	4	
Abuse of power and corruption	4	0	0	
Public outrages	24	3	7	
Other offences	8	7	51	
Accidents	1,070	1,337	1,341	+ 25%

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First, while the figures for murder, rape, theft, and armed robbery appear to have risen quite dramatically over the five year period, the number of cases registered is probably only a fraction of offences actually committed. Secondly, the figures for drug trafficking, gambling and corruption are so small that they show little, except that in 1971 the police suddenly and briefly took an interest in drugs and gambling. Thirdly, of the 1,337 accidents (assumed to mean road accidents) reported in 1971 for the whole country, 1,161 (86.8%) took place in the city of Vientiane and 111 (8.3%) in the province of Vientiane. The whole of the rest of the country reported 65 accidents.

A number of writers have reported instances of murders which appeared to have been approved, tacitly or in advance, by the community in which they took place.[2] Murder was seen as a last resort to rid the community of an intolerable burden, or to avenge an unpardonable

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1. Adapted from Royaume du Laos (1973).

2. e.g. Westermeyer (1971).

personal wrong. There seemed to be no confidence that such affairs would be correctly treated if handed over to the police. Indeed it is likely that most rural Lao communities were quite unaware of some of the functions which the police had been allocated in law. Village communities were not accustomed to turning to third parties to settle internal problems. This was only necessary if the dispute involved people from more than one village. Otherwise the judicial authority of the elders was quite sufficient.

While I was in Ban Phon Sung there were no incidents that went beyond the competence of the villagers themselves. The young man caught fishing in a restricted pond (Chapter Five) was given a punishment which fitted the crime but was also quite generous. He had to fish once a week for the others, but he was never sent home without something for his family. An older man had to be restrained and taken home on one occasion after a drinking party when he began to insult people. A few days later he invited the elders to a sūkhuan at his house, and killed a chicken to express his regret. The nai bān issued a stern rebuke, but said he was glad to announce that the man had agreed to reform. This speech was punctuated by sounds of approval from the other elders, who then started to give moral advice to the man, so that five or six people were speaking at once. Although the words were unintelligible, the general meaning was perfectly understood.

Even when some buffalo were stolen by rustlers at night,the owner at once assembled his relatives and called in the headman. If the Tasseng policeman was informed, it was a pure formality. A party of volunteers set off at once with rifles, knowing that the thieves must be heading south for the Thai border. Sure enough they caught up with

them two nights later, and recovered the animals although the thieves escaped.

There was another case which had concerned some Ban Phon Sung villagers, though it had not taken place there. The youngest brother of one of the best established households had spent many years of his youth as a Buddhist novice and monk. When he left the order, his brother, who had been successful in business, bought him a second-hand car to drive as a taxi, on the understanding that he would gradually repay his brother the purchase price from his earnings. None of the capital was repaid, however, and when the car went wrong, the elder brother even had to pay for the repairs. Then the boy was arrested in Vientiane for stealing a tape-recorder out of a foreigner's car. He had had to be bought out of jail and the damage paid for. Eventually the family had decided to disown him and they sold the car. Since then they had heard he was running another taxi from a small town not far away. What had gone wrong? They did not really know. When I asked one of his uncles, he said it could have been the girls in Vientiane, but it could also have just been 'modern life'. He shrugged his shoulders.

That young man had had no obvious financial problems to push him to such activities, but he could well have fallen into company where expenditure on drink, women and gambling were well in excess of his earnings from the taxi. Financial problems of one sort or another seemed to be at the bottom of most crime. A student in Vientiane came to see me in 1974 to recount what had happened to his friend, also a student that I knew and admired for his intelligence and enthusiasm. This young man had recently got married and had a baby. He lived with his wife's parents, but was embarrassed at being unable to contribute to the housekeeping. His government scholarship just about kept him

in cigarettes. He had therefore got involved in ferrying contraband from one side of the Mekong to the other. As he returned one night with a supply of goods, he was ordered to stop by a patrol of the Mixed Police, the joint Vientiane side and Pathet Lao side force which had been formed after the cease-fire in 1973. The Vientiane side man said, "Don't run, younger brother. We've got you covered and if you run, elder brother will be forced to shoot". So the student threw the contraband at their feet and ran. They did shoot, but he was sure it was for form's sake. They did not want to kill him, and since he had surrendered the booty, they had not really needed to try.

The circumstances which led this man to petty crime were reproduced in thousands of families. When one discussed the frightening explosion of criminal activities with Lao elite families, they would nearly always say, "Oh, these criminals come from Thailand, and there are also some Vietnamese youths involved. The Lao don't have these criminal tendencies. Look at the villages, there's no crime there".

The comment was interesting in its demonstration of how the reactions of Lao living in Vientiane had failed to keep pace with the developments in their own society. Certainly, many of the criminals came from Thailand, but they were ethnic Lao just the same. Equally, the large Vietnamese communities in the towns were just as vulnerable to the pressures of unemployment, poverty and the breakdown of social controls. But the point which elite Lao missed, and of which their poorer cousins were only too well aware, was that the conditions of urban life in Vientiane in the 1960s and early 1970s were openly conducive to breakdowns in social order, increases in crime and the spread of deviant social behaviour.

Vientiane was a small city, which may have reached a peak

population of 200,000 in 1973-74 by including some semi-rural communities within the municipal boundaries. During the years when I knew it, from 1968-74, it seemed almost possible to sense, even without the benefit of statistics to confirm it, that a continual rise in crime was taking place, in direct correlation with the end of the economic boom.

(b) Begging

In 1968 there were three or four well-known beggars who did occasional rounds of the shops and restaurants in Vientiane, amiable, elderly and slightly mad, and although the reaction of foreigners was often to turn up their noses and ignore them, most Lao invariably gave something, Lao currency being well provided with bank notes of minimal value. By 1974 it was impossible to sit through a meal at one of Vientiane's open-air restaurants without being approached at least once, probably several times, by beggars. They were a varied and motley bunch - old people, alone or in couples, mostly refugees, to whom most Lao gave something; blind men led by children, some playing the khāen or the violin (the musicians were better patronised); opium addicts; wounded teenage ex-soldiers; people who cleaned cars outside restaurants (with dirty rags and water from the drains) and then demanded money when the clients appeared; and small gangs of orphan children, one of which was particularly well known to foreign visitors, as they used to stand outside a cheap cafe catering to foreign tastes, and when the patrons left, they rushed in and licked the plates clean before the waiters could clear them.

It was interesting to observe the different reactions of Lao people and foreigners, mainly French or American, to the beggars. While the numbers of beggars were few, most Lao gave something, but always a small

amount, provided the beggar was obviously handicapped in some way - age, physical or mental disability. As the numbers increased, so Lao donors increased their selectivity, and there was only one beggar, elderly and slightly mad, who was reputed to give all the money he collected to the vat where he lived, who could rely on receiving something from almost every table, even in cheap restaurants frequented by relatively poor families. He was distinguished by wearing an ancient enamel chamber pot upside down on his head. Lao friends told me that it was bāp (a loss of 'merit') not to give to him. Otherwise Lao most often gave to the elderly. Some of these elderly people chanted quite lengthy Buddhist blessings of thanks when they received something, and the position from which most did their begging was crouched down with their hands in a position of prayer, muttering supplications. The Lao who gave invariably did so without a word. If they had decided not to give, and the beggar was particularly persistent, they would say, "I have no small change" or "next time" or "not giving" (this last particularly if the beggar was young and looked capable of work).

The foreigners, however, were unpredictable. There were those who did not give "on principle". Others gave selectively and apparently as the result of whim. They might give nothing several days running and then give $10 to one beggar "because he had a sad face". Some foreigners liked to interrogate beggars about where they had come from and why they were begging before they gave.

To a Lao, giving to a beggar was a form of 'making merit' (het bun). They would say that beggars did not do it in order to get rich, but only to survive. Their presence was an indication of a failure in society, and one should pity them. One's attitude should be determined by Buddhist principles applied in the villages. If a poor traveller asked for something to eat, any village family would give him a meal. Begging

was the same.

The rich elite, however, was not normally subjected to beggars, since the air-conditioned restaurants in which they ate were closed in, and the staff kept beggars out, just as the houses of the rich were often surrounded by high concrete walls. One occasionally witnessed, therefore, from a wealthy Lao, the same impetuous scolding of beggars as foreigners sometimes used.

(c) Prostitution

While theft, murder and begging increased between 1968 and 1974 with the rapid deterioration in the urban economic situation, prostitution seems to have decreased somewhat, not through lack of job applicants but due to a reduction in the numbers of the clientele. A few bars closed and their staff migrated to Bangkok. There were still a large number open in 1974, but often a room full of girls waited despondently all evening for one or two clients.

Prostitution was organised in Vientiane in a large number of small 'bars', which ranged from respectable nightclubs where one might go dancing with a girl-friend, to small rooms with a few bottles of alcohol on a shelf. Apart from the few high class nightclubs where girls nevertheless touted for custom, the other 'bars' doubled directly as brothels and had bedrooms at the back or on the top floor. The Bangkok system of massage parlours was virtually unknown. At the very bottom of the scale was a group of shacks behind the evening market where girls sold themselves for as little as 500 kip (about 40p in 1972 - depending on exchange rates). There were also individual houses in different parts of the town where a mama san (madame) provided a place for girls in need of casual employment and men requiring discretion.

Girls came into the business in a number of ways. Perhaps the most common story was of someone who had had a child without being married or who had been abandoned by her husband. In such circumstances many were ashamed, uncomfortable, or simply unable to make ends meet remaining in their home villages, and decided to leave their children with their parents and seek work in town. It was then they found that all forms of work in town for unskilled women (waitress, domestic servant, builder's labourer, etc.) paid a mere subsistence wage, and that they were most likely either to get into debt or be faced with an expenditure for which they could not raise the money. Ironically demands for money frequently came from the home village where mother would send word that the child was sick and needed medicine. Even if the girl was staying with relatives in Vientiane, the circles in which waitresses and domestic servants moved were well versed in how to enter the world of prostitution.

The final temptation was often that the 'bar' was willing to make a substantial cash advance on potential earnings, although they would not do this before obtaining a 'hold' on the girl as collateral. This was most easily done by a friend of the girl providing information about her home village. The threat was that if the girl ran away, the bar owner would inform her parents of what she had been doing.

There were cases, however, when girls were literally sold to bar owners by relatives or 'friends' who had lured them from their villages with offers of employment. In this case they had to work off the price that the bar had paid to that person, from which they had received no benefit. At the other extreme some girls started quite casually, going to a bar on occasional Saturday nights to supplement their income (in this case they paid either a fixed charge to the bar owner or a proportion of their earnings).

Not surprisingly girls tried not to practise in their home towns. Girls from the provincial capitals travelled to Vientiane, those from Vientiane went either across to Thailand or to the provincial towns.

In an article on modern Lao prostitution,[1] Doré notes that it is a recent phenomenon, but speculates that it may have existed from time to time in the past in periods of major military movements. He suggests that the reasons for its absence in the traditional village included the easy availability of sexual relations, the lack of economic and social differentiation in the village, and the essential social cohesion of the village community. He sees modern prostitution in Vientiane as evidence of a fairly profound change in Lao social life, largely due to the presence of new desirable material goods which only the elite could afford. Prostitution allowed girls to indulge their fancy for fine clothes, expensive perfumes and riotous entertainments.[2]

Doré analysed the phases through which most prostitutes passed as those of optimism, disillusion and resignation. During the phase of disillusion most try to abandon it, but few are able to do so for long. They then become resigned to their fate.

How did a Lao girl view her job as a prostitute? How did other Lao consider such girls? A case history may give a clearer impression:

> Miss C. was born in a village five miles from a large provincial town. When she was 13, her mother died, and she stopped going to school in order to look after her younger brothers and sisters. When she was 16 a cousin of her father's asked for her as a wife for his son. Her father accepted and so did she, since she had no particular objections to the man, and had nobody else in mind. In that part of the country the wife most often went to stay with her husband's family during the first few months of marriage, so she had moved in with them. However, she could not get on with her mother-in-law and since her husband was too feeble to stand up for her, she had run away to the provincial capital where she got a job as a waitress, staying with friends from her village who had moved there.

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1. Doré (1974b).

2. It should be noted that although prostitutes earned remarkable amounts [illegible] in comparison with most urban Lao, many were nevertheless

At that time she often went back to visit her home village, but then her father took a new wife who was a bad influence on him, and her uncle and aunt in Vientiane invited her to come and live with them. This was very kind of them, but it did not solve her financial worries. Her father was neglecting her brothers and sisters who desperately needed money for their schooling. She got various jobs in Vientiane, as a domestic servant and in a beauty parlour, but the wages were so low that she could only send very little money to her sister at home. She had made friends with a Vietnamese family that was connected with the beauty parlour, and one day they had talked and talked about what she could do, and the Vietnamese girl had offered to introduce her to a 'bar'. Eventually she decided to do it, told her uncle she was going home to her family and went with the Vietnamese girl to the bar. For the first three months she dared not step outside for shame and fear of meeting people she knew. The 'madame' was kind, though, and 'looked after the minds of the girls', creating something of a family atmosphere.

Then one day her uncle sent a message to the bar for her to go and see him. Somehow he had found out she was there. She didn't go because she was ashamed and afraid. Then he came to find her, but she hid in time and the other girls denied knowledge. But he came again in the evening, found her and took her home. She was very frightened, but he didn't shout at her and gave her a chance to explain why she was doing it. He wanted her to stop and go back to live with him, but she insisted on continuing. Reluctantly he agreed, but made her promise to go and visit them regularly. He and her aunt were very good to her, and never told anybody else in the family, always saying she worked in a shop.

Miss C. had the reputation among her colleagues of being calm, sensible and thoughtful. She was admired and liked for her smiling kindness to others. When other girls had problems, she tried to help and advise them. They would ask her why she didn't take a boyfriend like the other girls did. She replied that in Vientiane you could get married tomorrow, but you wouldn't be guaranteeing your future. The men that hung around girls like them were not trustworthy. She reckoned that out of one hundred people in this world, maybe two were really good. In the town you could never be sure whether the fine words were not all lies. It was better to be independent.

She would tell the other girls to be careful not to embarrass their boyfriends or their clients. If they saw them driving past the bar in the company of other people, they should not embarrass them by calling out or waving. If the men were alone, then one could discreetly call out to them. Some of the other girls would rush up to their men without thinking.

Once an American had wanted to buy her out of the bar and have her go to live with him. How much would it cost to release her from her debt at the bar, he had asked? In fact she hadn't been in debt at the time, but she had said $200 and the 'madame' had nodded in agreement. The American had said sure he would pay. She had thought about it, but in the end said no. He would leave eventually and then she would be back at the bar just as before, perhaps with a broken heart to add to her worries.

Some of the girls thought that Americans and other farang (foreigners) had no worries in life. They had plenty of money, they didn't seem to suffer at all. Sure, it was difficult to know what these foreigners were

thinking, but she imagined all people were really the same and must have much the same worries. Besides, when she had worked in the beauty parlour, many of the women there were married to foreign men. She loved listening to their conversations. The ones who had never been abroad couldn't wait to go, but those who had been didn't seem so enchanted by what they had seen.

Some of her friends in the bar had run up huge debts to the bar owner - 300,000 kip (US $500) was not uncommon. Of the money you got from a customer half went to the owner anyway, so that when you were in debt only half went to pay off the debt and the 'madame' kept you on an allowance. To pay back 300,000 kip therefore, the girl needed to earn 600,000 plus any living expenses - that was about 200 customers, and with business falling off it was hardly possible. She didn't often get into debt herself, and when she did, she tried to pay it off as quickly as possible.

Once her father had come to Vientiane to find her because he needed money urgently. He had gone to her uncle's house, and her aunt had managed to persuade him to stay there while she went out to look for her. She had rushed home to change out of her western-style clothes into a traditional Lao skirt and blouse and gone to see him. He had said he needed 80,000 kip urgently, and she had gone out and borrowed it from the bar. He hadn't asked her how she had got it, but when she was accompanying him to the taxi rank in a rickshaw, they passed in front of the bar where she worked. The silly girls there had shouted hello at her, but she had ignored them, looking straight ahead. When she got back she had scolded them for their thoughtlessness, and they had said they were very sorry - they had 'forgotten'. Her father may not have noticed, but anyway he wouldn't want to say anything even if he did suspect. He had just borrowed the equivalent of $2\frac{1}{2}$ months wages at the 'shop' where she worked and hadn't queried how she had managed to raise it.

The sad thing about some of the other girls was just that thoughtlessness which had allowed them to 'forget'. When they went back to visit their families, they didn't consider what was appropriate behaviour and an appropriate way to dress. Naturally people didn't welcome them back into the community if they put on airs and wore fancy make-up. When she went home to her village, she always wiped the make-up off first and dressed like an ordinary village girl. As soon as she got back she started doing the domestic jobs appropriate to her position in the family. Then, when she had been back for a day or two, neighbours would come round to visit and ask her about life in the town, and the old men would say they were glad to see that all that town life hadn't made her forget her family and that she still remembered how to fetch water and harvest rice. She would always take the opportunity to tell them that life was not as easy in the town as they might think, and that you had to work hard to make any money.

Miss C. was a devout Buddhist. When she was young, she used to go to the vat as often as she could to listen to the monks preach (thēt). Usually they told stories of the Buddha's life and of his previous incarnations before he became the Buddha. She loved listening to these stories. In Vientiane she went to the market early in the morning every holy day (van sin - 8th and 15th days of the lunar months), bought some fruit and took it to the vat. She had noticed that in town people did not seem to go to the vat as regularly as in the village. In her village

the vat was absolutely packed with people on the major festival days. You could hardly move. Every family gave rice to the monks in the mornings (tak bāt). She supposed that in the town people were too busy making money to feed themselves and their families. Many people worked in the evenings and all day Saturday and Sunday since their salaries were insufficient. Also the van sîn often fell on a weekday when people were obliged to go to work. In the villages one did the agricultural work on the appropriate days, and particularly in the dry season one had time to attend the vat and participate in the festivals.

Miss C.'s friends used to ask her why such a 'good', thoughtful, intelligent person, who could always see the reason for something and always thought of the other person's point of view, was involved in such a 'bad' profession. When they asked that, she would just smile and say nothing.

After about three years in the job Miss C. decided to return to her village. Her father had been persuaded by his new wife to build a new house and leave Miss C.'s elder sister and her husband in the old house with her younger brother and sister. With her earnings Miss C. had helped her sister buy a sewing machine and take classes in sewing. Now she was beginning to take in work from the villagers. Miss C. decided to go back and join her sister in this little business and devote herself to looking after the education of her younger brother and sister. She had maintained a good appearance in the village, so she could do that. It was no use going on in the bar until you were past it. The girls who did stay on got into debt, some took to drugs, it was an impossible life. She would settle down again in the village and if somebody eventually offered to marry her, she would consider it very carefully - perhaps a widower with a good reputation. In the village you could enquire about people. You could be more certain of their real character. In the town people were always liable to cheat you. Meanwhile, then, she would go home and grow rice in her family's fields.

Miss C. was unfortunately an exceptional case. Although some girls retained their independence and were able to reintegrate into their villages after a few years, and a number of her colleagues would return to their villages when the Pathet Lao take-over of 1975 rapidly closed the bars (see Appendix 1), others were too far embroiled in the life. Most crossed the Mekong to find work in Thailand, but a number of those who remained were taken for re-education on an island in the Nam Ngum lake.

The phenomenon of prostitution was clearly a product of upheaval in modern social life. Certainly the quest for social status which caused urban parents to keep a much closer watch on their daughters'

virginity, will have contributed to sexual frustration in the male population. Doré notes that many of Vientiane's prostitutes were rural girls ostensibly come to the capital to learn a trade or find a job. He suggests that some of them had an almost disembodied approach to their condition as prostitutes. They switched off their minds from considering their social status position and instead fantasised about a future of the sort portrayed in romantic films. For them their ideal did not exist in ritual or historical examples, but in their minds. Since the society in which they lived made no provision for such people in its ideologies, either traditional or modern, this was the best they could hope for.

(d) Drugs

On 1 September 1972 the Royal Lao Ministry of Public Health in Vientiane opened a National Detoxification Center, funded with USAID money and with an American adviser to assist the Lao doctor in charge. The facility had 33 beds and on 15 December the doctor in charge reported to the Lao language newspaper Xat Lao on its first three months of operation.[1]

Since the opening the Center had treated 141 people of whom 6 were women. Of this total, 101 were Lao, 28 Chinese, 6 Vietnamese, 4 Americans and 2 French. Sixty-one were addicted to opium, 41 to heroin, 36 to both opium and heroin and one to morphine. Many people requesting treatment had had to be turned away since only 33 people could be treated at once, though at least 15 enquiries were received each day.

Over 30 pupils from the prestigious secondary schools in the capital

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1. Xat Lao (1972).

had already been to request treatment, but they did not wish to be admitted for fear that teachers and parents would find out. Most of these children were from rich and well-known families.

The doctor in charge said that there seemed to be four reasons why people started taking drugs and became addicted. First, there were victims of painful or incurable diseases. Secondly, there were those who had heard that drugs induced sexual prowess and the ability to find and enjoy sex easily. Thirdly, there were those young people who worried about passing examinations and smoked to give themselves strength to study, and fourthly there were those who fell for the advertising of drug peddlars.

The Center used Methadone and this appeared to be fully effective. However, about 25% were coming back for a further cure after taking drugs again, either because they went back to their drug-smoking friends, or because old diseases returned which they could not stand without it, or because the drug sellers told them that those who stopped smoking after being addicted had short lives, looked like skeletons, went mad, and became homosexuals.

McCoy's book The Politics of Heroin in South-East Asia[1] is a brilliant report on the drug trade in the area and shows that Laos played an important part as production area, site of heroin factories and home of international drug salesmen. The American government rather belatedly put pressure on the Royal Lao Government to tackle the drug problem (McCoy suggests that American government agencies had been involved in trafficking) and provided funds and training for a special anti-drug unit in the national police as well as the Detoxification

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1. McCoy (1972).

Center described above. These efforts prompted the 35 arrests noted in the statistics for 1971, but the enthusiasm waned and the number went down to 5 in 1973 with no particular indication that the problem was by then any less severe.

Opium and heroin were relatively easily available in Vientiane throughout the period, and at prices a fraction of what addicts in New York are required to pay. Marijuana could be bought openly in the market for not much more than ordinary tobacco and some Lao cooks liked to put small quantities in the chicken soup.

While tolerance of marijuana was quite general, antipathy to opium and heroin was extremely strong. I noted in Chapter Five that in several areas Lao villagers had made useful profits from trading opium in the immediate post-Second World War period. They were mostly horrified at the suggestion that they might have smoked it.

Despite strong cultural opposition to the use of opium and heroin, quite large numbers of urban Lao clearly did become addicted, as the newspaper report quoted above suggests. One must also suppose that in the areas where Lao lived in close contact with the hill peoples who grew the opium, Lao villagers were also liable to become addicted, particularly those who were chronically ill or who had failed socially in some way. W.R. Geddes, in his book Migrants of the Mountains[1] suggests that addiction among non-producing groups who lived next to the Hmong (Miao) producers of opium in Northern Thailand may have been higher than among the Hmong themselves (for whom he estimates 5% of the population were addicted). Nevertheless I never came across an ethnic Lao village where there was an obvious problem of drug addiction, and in most villages, like Ban Phon Sung for example, I doubt whether opium

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1. Geddes (1976).

or heroin was ever used. The problem in modern Lao society was essentially an urban one.

The four reasons given by the doctor in charge of the National Detoxification Center for people taking up drugs in the first place should probably be expanded somewhat. I have noted the reported incidence of drug addiction among prostitutes. 'Young people who worried about passing exams' should probably read simply 'young people who worried'. The impossible situation in which many prostitutes found themselves of declining earnings, growing debts, increased family commitments frequently induced a despair for which the drug peddlar had a ready panacea. To a lesser extent the same symptoms were present in the student who failed his examinations and had to face the disappointment of parents who had spent every penny of their savings on his education, or in the wife who did not want to tell her husband that his salary was not enough to buy the household food and so had put half the month's allowance on a lottery number which a monk had told her would be lucky.

It is impossible to estimate how many Lao living in Vientiane were addicted to hard drugs in 1974, for example. The number was certainly small, perhaps 1% of the adult population at a wild guess. The misery which these people caused, and the social tensions of which their addiction was a symptom, were far more important than their actual numbers.

CHAPTER EIGHT MIGRATION AND MODERNISATION - A CONCLUDING ESSAY

In this thesis I have tried to illustrate some of the effects of modernisation on both rural and urban life in Laos. More particularly I have tried to show how institutions of traditional economic, political and social life have been adapted or superseded in rural and urban contexts in attempts to cope with the new problems with which people are confronted. It has become apparent that change in the organisation, for example, of social activities is not necessarily mirrored by change in the way people talk about those activities. Practice may develop more rapidly than ideology. This is to be expected, since ideology is involved with just those ritual activities which provide continuity and cultural specificity in any society, while everyday practice is more immediately affected by changes in the economic and social milieu.

While I have been concerned principally with the contrasts between rural and urban life-styles, I have tried not to give the impression that each has developed in a separate vacuum. The clue to their interrelationship is of course the movement of people between one and the other, and specifically the migration of certain groups from one to the other. As the title of this concluding chapter indicates, I feel that the interaction between migration and modernisation provides one of the most fertile fields of study for the understanding of social change in modern Laos. Before proceeding in the second part of this chapter with the analysis of my conclusions to the thesis as a whole, I should briefly pull together the elements of my discussion of migration.

Migration in Laos

I have looked at aspects of migration in Chapter Two (historical movements of peoples), Chapter Four (migrations out of, and into, the Vientiane Plain), and Chapter Five (migration to found new villages). It will be useful to break up these various examples into their constituent types.

(a) Traditional patterns of migration

In traditional Lao society the reasons for migration seem to have been principally: overpopulation, military force, disease and political dispute.

The first category, resulting from demographic pressure, is that described in Chapter Five, when a village becomes too populous for its agricultural potential and a number of young people set out to found a new village. In such cases the distance covered was not usually very great, allowing the new village if possible to maintain social contact with the original one.

Large-scale migration as a result of military force punctuates the history of Laos. The most striking example was the Siamese transfer of population out of Vientiane in 1828-9 following the failure of Chao Anou's attack on Bangkok. There are villages of Lao south of Bangkok to this day, whose ancestors were taken prisoner at that time, although the majority were resettled in North-East Thailand. The inhabitants of Ban Phon Sung may well have left the Xieng Khouang plateau as a result of the uncontrollable ravages of Ho pirates on annual expeditions of pillage from Yunnan in the early nineteenth century.

Since epidemics were thought to result from the displeasure of

spirits, a period of disease might lead to the relocation of a village, but the move would not usually be far, possibly only a few hundred yards, so that people could easily dismantle their houses and build them again on the new site.

Migration as a result of political dispute could occur if a minority faction of a village felt that life had become impossible and that it was worth moving in order to obtain political independence. I have described how a substantial number of Ban Phon Sung families threatened to take this action in 1960, but were eventually persuaded against it.[1]

The four types of migration noted above all result from what has been called the 'push' mechanism, and all involve large groups of people moving together. People move because they are obliged to. There is the assumption that they would not have done so, if particular circumstances had not arisen in the village itself which forced them out. Since they have to move, they tend to do so in large groups in which the identity of the original village can be preserved.

I think we may assume, however, that these were not the only types of traditional migration. During the periods of royal success and urban magnificence, the towns were undoubtedly populated by people attracted to them by the news of wealth and splendour, as well as those brought there as prisoners, slaves or soldiers in the king's army. People were 'pulled' to the town by the opportunities for study in a Buddhist monastery, with the eventual social advancement that this implied, by the attractions of festivities and colourful entertainments,

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1. Taillard gives a modern example of a new village being founded following such a split in Taillard (1977a) p. 81.

and probably by sheer curiosity. Their descendants, however, were probably soon 'pushed' out again when the king died and the town was sacked by neighbouring princes. This sort of rural-urban migration was also more likely to be done in the small groups not typical of the other types, and might represent the individual initiative of young people. In addition, it would be wrong to forget that the Lao seem to have been inveterate small-scale traders, and there must have been many cases of young men who set out on trading expeditions in the dry season never to return home, because they found themselves wives in distant villages which they visited for trading purposes. It would be wrong to give the impression that the Lao never moved out of his village unless he was pushed.

(b) Modern patterns of migration

Surprisingly or not, it seems that patterns of traditional migration have changed remarkably little in modern times. Those migrating in relatively large groups from rural area to rural area do so when 'pushed' by military force, demographic pressure or political dispute. Those migrating from countryside into towns do so for the most part in small groups or individually, and are motivated at least partly by the 'pull' of the city's attractions.

How does this perhaps over-simple analysis help the understanding of modern Lao society? First, the link between group size and motivation in migration allows some immediate comments. Those migrants who are 'pushed' and remain in village-type groups can be expected to retain the social and political organisation of their original homes. They did not leave voluntarily, and they try to preserve an identity within an existing community. Their appreciation of their new environment will be principally economic, therefore. If the livelihood avail-

able to them on the new site is less satisfactory than what they knew in the old, then they may well look for an early opportunity to return to the area they came from.

In contrast, those migrants who are 'pulled' individually or in small groups into the towns have deliberately moved away from the identity they had in village society to seek a new one. Although this does not mean they will break off social ties with their home villages, they are much more ready to adapt to new conditions, and will assess their new position in terms of its social and political advantages, as well as the purely economic. A decision to return to the village of origin would seem much less likely, since this is either an admission of failure or a rejection of the advantages which city life offers.

Such considerations of course apply to those announcing their intention to migrate permanently to the town. Seasonal migration for temporary employment, which is a feature of all Asian cities, need not imply an adaptation to urban ways. Textor[1] showed how Lao migrated temporarily from North-East Thailand to Bangkok to work as rickshaw drivers and lived in closed communities of migrants from which they rarely emerged except to work.

These theoretical distinctions between types of migration are borne out in practice, though evidently with differences of detail. The major wave of migration in Laos since independence has been within the rural areas and has been caused by the war. It is estimated that 700,000 people, or a quarter of the population, were uprooted, the vast majority in the years 1960-74, and of these perhaps 90% were resettled outside the major towns on temporary or permanent sites. Forty

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1. Textor (1956).

thousand such people, mostly from Xieng Khouang province, were re-settled in the Vientiane Plain, mostly between 1968 and 1973, but inevitably they could be given only marginal scrub land which nobody else had thought worth settling on. They were able, however, to retain their village political organisation, and when the opportunity came in 1975 to return to their original villages, most of them took it, since the economic environment in which they had been relocated was so much inferior to that which they had left. Many of those who hesitated to return in 1975 for political reasons (uncertain of the welcome they would find) eventually decided to go in 1976 and 1977. Those who chose not to return were almost all young people who had found jobs, education or friends in Vientiane.[1] Such people had in a sense been subject to the 'pull' of the city which had attracted the voluntary urban migrants.

At the other end of the scale I have already pointed out that very few voluntary migrants to the towns were ready to consider the possibility of returning to their home villages, even at a time of rapid economic decline. Some talked, nevertheless, of finding a bit of land in the country, and I have quoted the example of the policeman who, although he already owned land and cattle in the south of the country, could not envisage returning there, but thought it would be pleasant to settle in the Vientiane Plain. Voluntary rural-urban migration is in a very real sense a definitive, irreversible move.

Alongside these two basic movements of Lao migration in recent years - the 'push' rural-urban migration of large groups prompted by

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1. In a few cases the decision to return or not in 1975 split immediate families. There were scenes at the airport with husbands and wives arguing up to the moment of take-off - the husband perhaps unwilling to leave his job, the wife not wishing her parents to return without her.

the war, and the 'pull' rural-urban migration of small groups and individuals prompted by hope of economic and social advantage - there are other smaller but nevertheless significant patterns. Among the rural-urban migrants there were of course those who were 'pushed', either by the war or by demographic pressures. As I have said, most of the war 'refugees' were resettled in rural areas, and those who arrived in the towns in large groups were relocated outside the town by the authorities. Some 'refugees', however, managed to settle in town, either because they were able to stay with friends or family, or because they were travelling alone or in a small group which was able to find a niche in urban society. On the whole such groups were among the poorest people in town - apart from those with influential relatives. One notable exception to this pattern was the migration of Tai Dam (Black Tai) refugees and their settlements in Vientiane. They were rural-urban migrants who moved in relatively large groups and tried to retain their initial political and social organisation in town. They would certainly have returned to their home-lands in northern Vietnam if their leaders had felt there was any chance of retaining their political identity there.[1] Other Tai minority groups were less successful in their attempts to create replica villages within the town, but nevertheless organised themselves as far as possible along traditional lines.

Also among the rural-urban migrants were those who were 'pushed' by demographic pressure in their original villages, but could find no new land suitable for rural settlement. The majority of such cases in Vientiane came from North-East Thailand, as demographic pressure in

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1. These groups of Tai Dam had fought for the French against the Vietminh. Large numbers have now emigrated to the United States and France.

Laos had still not become really severe over any large area (as the ability of the government to resettle large numbers of 'refugees' in rural villages demonstrates, even if most of the land was relatively infertile). Vientiane did contain, therefore, as did all the towns of North-East Thailand, and indeed all the Mekong valley towns of Laos, people pushed out of the rural villages of North-East Thailand by repeated crop failure, overpopulation, debt or hunger. Such problems did arise in Laos itself in particular cases, but clearly not on the same scale as in Thailand.

The reasons for which people migrate in the first place affect their attitudes to the places they migrate to. The 'refugees' in the villages on the Vientiane Plain considered their stay temporary, and seemed to believe that the government, having moved them there, was obliged to feed them and decide what would happen to them. Those who moved voluntarily into town knew that success depended on their own efforts and that wherever they were was in a sense their permanent home. In the case of the 'refugees' in the Vientiane Plain, the fact that a high proportion had been physically moved by aeroplane when parts of Xieng Khouang province were evacuated by the Royal Lao army probably increased their feelings of dependence. They were in a position very similar to that of prisoners taken in a traditional military campaign, the only difference being that on the whole (and perhaps to their surprise) they were not expected to provide physical labour for their new masters.

The man who voluntarily left the security of his rural village (however tenuous that security might objectively appear to have become), either to establish a new village or to begin life in the town, might, if he went to the town, seek an influential patron to help him establish himself, but he would expect to have to provide services to that patron.

He might, later on, protest that 'the government' did not look after him, but this would only be because in his view the government was not fulfilling its side of the contract into which they had entered when he took up employment, i.e. that 'the government' would provide him with a living in return for his services as an employee.

Patterns of migration, the motivation behind it, and the attitudes connected with it, were influential in the processes of social change in recent years in Laos. It is only when migration is considered in the context of rapid modernisation, however, that an analysis of modern Lao society as a whole is possible.

Migration and moder-nisation - a concluding analysis of the inter-relationship

Traditional village life, as I have described it, was circumscribed by two fundamental constraints, one economic and one social. The economic constraint was that no household might own more land than it might reasonably farm by itself. This principle, when allied to the variations in fortune associated with the developmental cycle of the domestic group meant that people were obliged to enter into relationships of credit and obligation in work and in kind with their neighbours, acquiring obligations during the lean period of the domestic cycle and discharging them during the productive period. The social constraint was the principle that social prestige and spiritual merit were acquired by the expenditure and redistribution of an 'appropriate' proportion of one's accumulated wealth rather than by its retention and transfer to descendants.

These constraints and principles imply a philosophy of cooperation at the level of the village - or at least among a relatively large number of households, since the loans of services and produce which prevent one

from starving in the lean periods must be freely offered against expectation of repayment, and the festivals, whether at the village level, like the Boun Phavēt, or in the family, like the thān ceremony for a deceased relative, require the participation of large numbers of people to ensure their success.

In addition, the economic and social support which the individual and the household receive from other members of the village, are balanced by the political and judicial control to which they must submit, exercised by the council of elders, with the headman as their nominal representative.

The modernisation of the rural economy, beginning in the colonial period and accelerating rapidly since independence in 1954, inevitably began to upset the balance on which this traditional model was constructed. The introduction of a money economy, the possibilities for cash trade in village subsistence items, such as rice and fish, the hiring of labour for cash, and the spread of share-cropping tenancies which signalled the exhaustion of good new farming land, all these features of the new economy combined gradually to remove the need for some families to incur any economic obligations during the lean period of the domestic cycle. It became possible for the individual household to ensure its own self-sufficiency without contracting debts with others. Indeed patterns of debt and credit which had once been cyclical became more often fixed in one direction. A poor farmer found it increasingly difficult to escape from a situation of indebtedness, since the new economic conditions tended to reinforce the wealth of his creditor and prolong his own poverty.

The modernisation of the rural economy created new felt needs which were linked to a requirement for continuing economic prosperity.

Medical care might now, as in one example given in Chapter Five, consume most of the accumulated wealth of an individual household. Previously the expenditure on local practitioners could never be heavy, and the slaughtering of a cow or pig, following a cure, though sacrificing capital, would involve at the same time the acquisition of prestige and the accumulation of credits with those who came to eat it. Education no longer involved simply the expense of ordination as a novice or monk, expenditure which at the same time brought immediate spiritual recompense in the form of merit. It became necessary to make a long-term capital investment in equipment, travel and living expenses, while sacrificing the productive labour of a young family member at a time when he could be expected to contribute to increased prosperity in the subsistence economy. Moreover, the return on investment depended on the success of the child in educational competitions, a result which became increasingly difficult as the numbers of candidates rose continually.

In brief, the modernisation of rural life in Laos, which took place particularly rapidly between 1955 and 1975 in areas like the Vientiane Plain, promoted the adoption of economic methods implying competition, in place of those requiring cooperation. While the social ideology of the people concerned remained that of popular Buddhism with its emphasis on merit-making, the removal of economic constraints limiting the individual accumulation of wealth, and the introduction of expensive new social needs such as medical care and education, meant that villagers were able to justify to themselves the stock-piling of amounts of wealth which would previously have seemed quite unnecessary. In rural areas relatively close to the towns, the acquisition of consumer goods also gradually began to have an influence, as did the increased involvement in political affairs which was brought on by the

improvement of communications. While this involvement does not seem generally to have been direct enough to call into question the political and social ideology of the village, it did of course introduce new ideas into the minds of young people particularly, who might as a result be alienated from their parents, or indeed from village life altogether, seeking fulfilment in the very different environment of the town.

The modernisation of urban Laos was not so much a process as the imposition of a totally new phenomenon from outside. I have shown how the ruling elite tried to maintain the political ideology of traditional Lao towns by preserving or resurrecting the ritual ceremonies and titles which had legitimised political power in the past. The town was divided administratively in exactly the same way as the rural areas into mū'ang (districts), tāsaēng (sub-districts) and bān (villages). The reality of the economic organisation of urban life, however, was so different from the principles on which traditional urban life had been based, that the national political ideology of the royalist government made little sense, or anyway had little impact. Even the social ideology of Lao village and family life was called into question by the development of urban conditions. How did this come about?

The traditional Lao capital city was the creation, often short-lived, of its king. Whether its population was brought there through military capture, or through desire to study at the religious universities which it contained, the city and its population mirrored the talents and achievements of its monarch. In a very real sense the city belonged to him. Souligna Vongsa's Vientiane attracted Buddhist scholars from all over Indo-China, but the city died with him. When Chao Anou's ambition got the better of his wisdom, defeat inevitably provoked the destruction of the city. The fortunes of an urban dweller

in traditional Laos were therefore inextricably bound up with those of his king. At a practical level it seems that all urban dwellers must have been obliged to find a patron at the court whose office they could serve and from whom therefore they obtained their livelihood. An army commander fed himself and his men in the villages from which they recruited, but ideally of course they lived off the plundered wealth of their enemies. Other officials and their servants lived off the revenue of customs duties and fees for the administration of justice. Each such office, however, was owed to the benevolence of the king. Provided that the man could obtain a livelihood from the exercise of the office he remained in the debt of the king who had accorded him the office. When the king died, became incompetent or was defeated in battle, the whole intricate pyramid was liable to collapse. The official could no longer obtain a livelihood from his office, his retainers left him to go and grow rice in the countryside, and the city, if it was not sacked, quickly began to decay.

The city of Vientiane, which grew from a population of 1,000 in 1900 to 23,000 in 1943, to 175,000 in 1973, was not founded on this principle. First of all it was built by foreigners. The fact that the French decided to construct the seat of their Résident Supérieur on the site of the ruined city was perhaps the source of future confusion as to the nature of the new city. This confusion could only be compounded by the French desire to restore derelict ancient monuments. It began to look as though the ancient capital of the Lao kings was being resurrected. Nothing could have been, in reality, further from the truth. Up until 1954, with a brief interval between 1945 and 1946, Vientiane was a colonial city, built by the French, administered by Vietnamese civil servants and run at a loss in the context of a single political unit called Indo-China. From 1954 to 1974 it developed

into a fairly significant pawn in an international chess-game of global proportions. In order to maintain this role (as an outpost of the "free" world), its international supporters (principally the United States, but also Britain, France, Japan and Australia) proved willing to spend very large sums of money on a one-off or 'windfall' basis, which transformed the urban economy into an entirely consumer-oriented one. Production was unnecessary, since income with which to pay for consumption was guaranteed by a political bargain whose terms were largely incomprehensible to the population, and which depended on events and forces quite outside their control.

At the level of social and political organisation, these largely economic developments had a profound effect. First of all the king clearly had very little to do with the life or prosperity of the city. Secondly, while Lao personalities were accorded impressive-sounding titles and positions in the government, it was clear to most people that these were channels to economic wealth rather than to genuine control over the lives of the population. The people who actually controlled the purse-strings, and therefore possessed genuine political power, were foreigners, principally the Americans of USAID. The ideal to which prominent Lao aspired was therefore seen to be wealth rather than power. This was an extremely significant development.

At the level of social ideals the principle of bun (merit) acquired through the performance of religious acts remained generally intact, but the economic and social context within which it existed was so different that it lost much of its original significance. First, the process by which rural dwellers might escape from the cycle of credit and debt was enormously speeded up in the town. Huge amounts of money might be accumulated in a short time. Secondly, the range of desirable consumer goods which suddenly became available meant that

the acquisition of wealth could now be an end in itself rather than a means towards the gaining of prestige in the community. Goods such as television sets, stereo systems, air-conditioners and luxury cars were for the pleasure and comfort of the owner and his immediate family. The buffaloes which the peasant accumulated in the village were a means towards obtaining credit and prestige in the community. When a wealthy urban family wished, therefore, to acquire bun by performing a religious act (constructing a new vat, for example), they very often failed to acquire the social prestige in the local community which traditionally went with such actions, since they were not part of that community in the first place.

More important even than this, however, was the fact that the members of the various social categories were not necessarily linked in the patron-client relationship typical of traditional urban life. People might come into town and obtain employment without the intervention of any influential patron. Their wealth and success did not necessarily depend on the political fortunes of a particular senior official. Certainly such patronage did exist in the modern military and in the civil service, but instead of being accepted as the normal procedure, it was actually deplored by the effective political masters, the Americans, as illegal, wrong and corrupt. Recruitment to the well-paid jobs in USAID was at least partly on the basis of ability proved in competition. The philosophy of traditional political organisation was therefore under constant attack in the classrooms and among certain sections of the elite.

In these circumstances, when economic wealth was no longer a direct means towards the raising of one's prestige in the community as a whole, and no longer implied the existence of a large network of patronage, but rather could be viewed as the means towards the

accumulation of material goods, then the basic ideology of urban life naturally tended to be that of competition against one's neighbours for the possession of scarce resources, rather than that of co-operation with those neighbours to increase the glory of a single monarch in whose light everybody basked.

The conditions in which such a change in philosophy might take place imply a considerable reduction in the elements of community life found in the rural villages. In fact such a reduction was naturally encouraged by the type and scale of the rural-urban migration described earlier in this chapter.

I noted that rural-urban migration tended to be individual or in very small groups, in contrast to the rural-urban migration of large, stable groups. This analysis is borne out by my research in Ban Savang where the largest extended family consisted of two or three households, and the birth-places of the residents ranged across almost every province in the country. The 150,000 additional inhabitants of Vientiane since 1943 (and the smaller numbers of similar migrants in the other major towns) were linked by much stronger social ties to their home villages than to their next-door neighbours. The growth of a local community in the town was bound to be discouraged to a large extent by the existence of continuing commitments to family in home villages. I have described how urban migrants who supported their rural cousins in the heady days of urban prosperity in the 1960s were able to turn to those same cousins for reciprocal support in the 1970s when the boom came to an end. Urban neighbours were obliged to compete in an economic contest, and the traditional village gestures of harmonious social interaction sometimes went incongruously alongside a bitter competition for individual advantage.

My analysis is too simplistic, however, since people of course react differently and think differently. Many tried to recreate in the town the community of the village. Others would actually insist that it existed, that Lao people were Lao people, and that they thought and behaved the same wherever they lived. What they would not admit is that behaviour is a response to a general cultural stimulus. Those patterns of behaviour which are stimulated by the 'elements of continuity' in a culture, which I have called its political and social ideology, must eventually come into conflict with the elements susceptible to rapid change in everyday practice. In other words the ways in which Lao people tended to think of, and talk about, their society, were derived mostly from a corpus of traditional ideology based on ritual communications, and described in culturally specific terms. This inevitably changed more slowly than the ways in which they adapted their everyday behaviour and language to conform with patterns introduced by foreigners.

These foreign influences were not of course pulling, or pushing, in a single uniform direction, nor was their influence the same over the whole gamut of activities. To take two simple examples: the foreign promoters of the Christian religion had little impact on Lao Buddhists, though they had more success with minority hill peoples. Similarly, the cultural mores of modern Asian cities portrayed in films shown in the urban cinemas inevitably had more influence on the young relatively well-off people who went to see them, than on the elderly peasant brought to live in the town by his son, who never entered a cinema in his life. Clearly one of the features of modern urban Laos was the wide range of diverse influences to which its inhabitants were subjected, and the equally wide variety of their reactions.

Ironically, although the modern Lao city was not predicated on the survival of its king, it was to prove just as vulnerable to the removal of its life-line of international finance. In Appendix 1 (below) I give a brief résumé of events in Laos since my research finished in December 1974. It is not my purpose in this thesis to discuss the ideology or political organisation of the government which transformed the Kingdom of Laos into the Lao People's Democratic Republic on 2 December 1975. It will be clear, however, that such a transformation involves not simply the sort of radical upheaval of traditional organisation which was taking place up until 1974, but the imposition of a totally new ideology on which the state and its institutions are based. Ironically again it looks as though this revolution (for revolution is implied by a change of ideology, reform by changes in organisation) will elevate to the level of political ideology certain features of traditional practice. Specifically, 'cooperation', not simply at the level of the village, but nationally, is not to be a means towards an economic or social end, but rather an end in itself, an expression of a political ideal.

The source of this new ideology is of course no less foreign than were the sources of change during the colonial and post-colonial periods. However, perhaps the most important change otherwise is that the new government will be obliged, theoretically at least, to balance its economic books. If the towns of Laos are to survive, they will have to create an economic relationship with the rural areas which they have not had in living memory. It is to be hoped that they can create something more stable than that which traditionally characterised the relationship between king, urban citizens and rural peasant farmers.

APPENDIX 1 LAOS SINCE 1974

This appendix looks briefly at events in Laos between December 1974 and the time of writing.

Laos was the only one of the three Indo-Chinese countries to end its civil war by an effective cease-fire (February 1973) and by the formation of a coalition government (April 1974). When, in early 1975, the regimes in Saigon and Phnom Penh moved rapidly towards military defeat at the hands of their communist opponents (March/April 1975), the effect on the morale of right-wing leaders in Vientiane, and on the United States government, was bound to be considerable.

In May 1975 demonstrations in Vientiane, mainly of students prompted by the Pathet Lao leadership, demanded the expulsion of USAID and the resignation of four extreme right-wing ministers in the coalition government. As a result USAID was withdrawn completely and the number of Americans officially in Laos reduced from over 800 to 27 (Embassy staff) by the end of June. The right-wing leaders under attack quickly left the country, initiating a movement of those who felt they had most to lose by the turn of events.

From June until December 1975 the process of unification of the country under the total control of the Pathet Lao took place. Royal Lao Army units denounced their officers and joined the Liberation Army. Local committees were formed to demand the resignations of provincial and district governors and their replacement by 'revolutionary administrative committees'. All this took place virtually without bloodshed, except in the case of the Hmong minority people with the remnants of General Vang Pao's army, who fled in panic from their huge refugee camps in Long Cheng and Sam Thong (Xieng Khouang province) to new

refugee camps in Thailand (see below).

On 1 December 1975 King Savang Vatthana abdicated and on 2 December the monarchy was abolished by a 'People's Congress' meeting in secret, which also acclaimed Kaysone Phomvihane (already Secretary-General of the Lao People's Revolutionary Party) as Prime Minister and Prince Souphanouvong as President. All ministerial posts were taken over by Pathet Lao men, the Joint National Political Council (the parliament of the Provisional Government of National Union) was disbanded and replaced by the Supreme People's Assembly, and a number of right-wing and neutralist members of the government were kept in Sam Neua, where they had been taken for a 'meeting' a few days before.

The Pathet Lao were therefore in complete control of the administration. It will be interesting to examine the major changes they initiated in a variety of fields.

Reform of the administrative system and introduction of functional associations

As noted above, the basic feature of administrative reform has been to replace executive officials by administrative committees at all levels, each with a President, Vice-President and members. The members are usually responsible for particular spheres of activity, such as health, education or agriculture, and head a sub-committee to deal with it. In addition, the new system reaches down to much smaller units, so that for every ten households there is a hua nā nuai ('unit leader') responsible to the hua nā khum ('ward leader'), who oversees 3-5 such 'units'. The village seems deliberately to be given less emphasis as a political unit, and the hua nā khum may report direct to the sub-district committee (kammakān tāsāeng).

In addition to the executive committees, to which members were appointed, initially at least, consultative assemblies (saphā) were elected at each level from the sub-district up. Candidates for election had to be approved, however, and in the first such elections there were usually about 30 candidates for 25 places.

These changes were obviously aimed at increasing the participation of ordinary people in the political process, as well as increasing the direct control of the administration over the population. Perhaps the most effective innovation towards these ends, however, was the introduction of functional associations. By the creation of Patriotic Associations for Young Men, Young Women, Women, Farmers and different categories of workers, the entire population was quickly enrolled in an association of one kind or another. These were organised down to the village level, and their activities included political education and discussion, cooperative vegetable growing, cultural performances (particularly dancing), sport and community construction projects.

Re-education

'Re-education' of those 'confused and misled by the reactionary, pro-American regime' (i.e. the entire population of the zone previously administered by the Royal Lao Government) took place in a number of ways.

Nearly all the senior officers (Lieutenant-Colonel and above) of the Royal Lao Army, and a large number of senior civil servants, who had not fled the country, were taken to 're-education camps' in the old Pathet Lao part of the country. It is reported that they spend part of their time in political education and the rest in productive labour to ensure their self-sufficiency. It seems unlikely that many of

them will be allowed to return to Vientiane or the other Mekong towns in the near future, and their wives are apparently being encouraged to leave their urban homes and go to join them, presumably in some supervised area in the original Pathet Lao zone.

Junior former soldiers, policemen and civil servants undergo regular re-education 'seminars' at their place of work. In the early months a ministry might virtually shut down for several weeks of such seminars. When they return home in the evenings, people must also participate in the seminars organised by the local committees of the administration or functional associations.

Two islands on the Nam Ngum lake were taken over for the re-education of the 'victims of the former society'. These consisted of people rounded up by the police in occasional swoops, who had been denounced as - in the men's case - drug addicts, 'hippies', petty criminals and general anti-social characters; in the women's case most were prostitutes.

'Culture'

The one clear message about 'cultural' activities which the new administration put across at once was that 'culture' should have political meaning and content. The songs of the Pathet Lao are all about 'the heroic struggle of the masses against oppression' and not about 'the man who broke my heart with cruel lies'. Traditional music has been arranged to new words. Even the tune of the royalist national anthem has been retained as the national anthem, but with a new text. Dances, while preserving traditional movements and gestures, used, for example, to present the Ramayana stories, now illustrate 'the happy workers harvesting the rice' or 'the patriotic soldiers beating back

the enemy'.

The attitude towards Buddhism, spirit-cult practice and the other religious elements of Lao total culture, has not yet become altogether clear. Buddhist monks are being encouraged to grow some of their food and to become active politically. Monks from the original Pathet Lao areas have made inflammatory political speeches against the Americans, a thing which would previously have been unthinkable. It is not clear, however, if the intention is to eliminate religion entirely over a period of time. Equally uncertain is the long-term official attitude towards traditional festivals, whether urban, like the boat-races or the New Year ceremonies in Luang Prabang, which are important features of traditional royalist political ideology, or the village festivals, such as the rocket festival or Boun Phavet. The desire to eliminate wasteful conspicuous consumption and to obscure any reminders of the role of the monarchy seems to be competing with the need to avoid alienating the population and allowing them appropriate occasions for public relaxation.

The new government has also made it clear that it feels competent to intervene at the level of the social organisation of the family, specifically with the practices surrounding marriage. Marriages must now be approved by the local authority, and those who work for the government must get permission from their bosses. In general this is not granted if the couple are considered too young. The practice of paying bride-wealth is being discouraged, and marriage ceremonies may be sponsored by the organisations for which the two people work, or by associations of which they are members.

Economy

One of the first effects of the departure of USAID in May/June

1975 was the collapse of the urban economy, already in decline. Shops rapidly sold out their stocks and closed down, as foreign exchange became impossible to obtain through the banks and horrendously expensive on the black market. The Chinese who had run most of the shops left the country. The standard of living of the urban population slumped, unwanted luxury goods flooded the market at ridiculously low prices, since nobody could afford to buy. Houses which had been let to Americans in May 1975 for $300 a month could be had in September for $20.

The government introduced measures to fix the price of rice, to encourage urban dwellers to grow vegetables and raise livestock, and these moves were partially successful, but they could not replace the many essential items which had to be imported, and which could now only be obtained at sky-high black market prices.

In June 1976 the royal currency was replaced by the 'Liberation kip', a brilliantly organised operation which contributed somewhat to controlling inflation. It could not eliminate the black market, however, nor close the gap between low salaries, on which one could not survive, and high prices.

The effect of this economic collapse on the rural areas was of course less severe, but the tendency was naturally to inconvenience those communities or individuals who had been most closely connected to the urban economy.

The government seemed to be undecided initially on how much free movement of goods and private enterprise commerce should be allowed or encouraged. Several times they were forced to liberalise regulations introduced to fix prices and put trade in state hands, as the market just dried up and commerce ground to a halt. The government's economic

policy clearly had to concentrate on the development of agriculture and in this connection it is interesting to look at the way in which the Minister of Agriculture in April 1977 outlined the government's four-stage plan for the development of advanced cooperatives:

> "The first stage would be to form solidarity groups in villages based on the age-old samakhī - the Lao tradition of mutual help. The second step would be to organise this cooperation on a regular basis of exchange of labour with different groups specialising in certain tasks.
>
> In the third stage - the initial formation of cooperatives - the peasants would retain their individual ownership of land but would collectively use tools and draught animals. This stage could be attained in the old Pathet Lao zones in the north and east of Laos immediately.
>
> The fourth and highest stage of cooperatives would involve common ownership of land and tools of production. According to (the Minister) this type of cooperative could be set up immediately in the most devastated zones".[1]

The government also introduced an agricultural tax - it will be recalled that the rural population of the Royal Lao Government controlled areas paid no taxes of any kind! This was aimed at encouraging the return of land to the tiller by taxing large land-owners more heavily. The tax rises from 8% (after an initial 100 kgs of paddy free of tax for each household member) to 30% on large surpluses, making it uneconomic for farmers to employ wage labourers to cultivate land greatly in excess of their family's needs.

Campaigns to avoid waste and encourage contributions to the national economy obliged the farmer to obtain permission before slaughtering any of his livestock, and if permission was granted, gave the state the chance to buy any parts of the animal left over at the official government price. The government was trying to make farmers aware that they were part of a national economy. Although the economic upheaval was not so severe in the countryside as in the towns, there was bound to be resentment at the loss of economic freedom that some

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1. Chanda, Nayan (1977) p. 125.

of these measures entailed.

Migrations and refugees

The revolutionary changes described above were accompanied by extremely large movements of population, on the scale of those which had taken place in the previous twenty years or so, but in a very much shorter space of time. There were three types of movement: the return of internal 'refugees' from the war to their villages of origin, the departure of those wishing to leave the country after the take-over of the Pathet Lao, and the gradual emptying of the cities as a result of the economic situation.

It is estimated that perhaps as many as 400,000 out of the 700,000 people who were uprooted during the course of the war were able to return to their original homes between 1975 and 1977. Some went with government and UN assistance, others just set out under their own steam. Most of these people had been settled in the temporary villages described above, on land where they had been unable to earn a satisfactory living. Nevertheless most of them would find the initial period of reconstruction of villages and rehabilitation of abandoned fields - in some cases full of unexploded bombs - to be a daunting task.

It was hardly surprising that substantial numbers of people should wish to leave the country in the face of urban economic collapse combined with a new authoritarian political regime. Again it is difficult to assess the numbers, but over 100,000 have been registered in the refugee camps of Thailand, where most still remain - the remainder having found asylum in France, the United States or Australia. It is quite possible that as many again have simply integrated into ethnic Lao families in North-East Thailand. It should be remembered that there was a regular influx of migrants from North-East Thailand into Laos throughout the

period since independence. Many have now returned whence they came.

Those refugees now in camps are principally of two categories: ethnic Lao inhabitants of the towns, and minority hilltribes people, particularly Hmong, who were closely associated with the right-wing army of General Vang Pao. The most violent episodes have concerned the attempts of the Hmong minority loyal to Vang Pao either to leave the country or to resist the Pathet Lao's administration. About 45,000 are now in camps in Thailand, which may be nearly a quarter of the total numbers of Hmong in Laos. Others are being resettled with some difficulty by the new Lao government, since the government wishes to eliminate their traditional slash-and-burn cultivation on the mountain tops and encourage them to settle in valleys. It also wishes to exercise control over opium cultivation. Small groups are still reported to be resisting the government in armed rebellion in the mountains.

The problem is aggravated by the division of the Hmong minority throughout the war into two camps, those who supported Vang Pao and were directly financed and equipped by the Americans, and those who supported Faydang, another Hmong leader, who took his followers in with the Pathet Lao movement and is now a Vice-President of the Supreme People's Assembly. A number of Lao officials have pointed out that while some right-wing Hmong may accept that they have little to fear from the new government itself, they have some reason to fear the personal revenge of their own cousins who fought on the other side.

General

A number of brief points in conclusion may give an idea of general trends operating in Lao society over the past three years.

The new political ideology is no longer based on the royalist notion of service to the king, but on the idea of the sovereignty of 'the people'. In this connection, the 'Party', the Lao People's Revolutionary Party, claims to be the unique voice of the people, the only interpreter of their wishes. As a secret organisation, the supreme policy-making organ of government, it aims to acquire a mystique similar in some ways to the mystique of the king's authority. Symbolic of this almost religious quality of the party is the fact that, unlike every other political grouping in the country, it does not have a President. Its senior official is the Secretary-General. One might see from this an attempt almost to deify 'the will of the people', mysteriously communicated to the Politburo of the Central Committee, and from there handed down by decree.

Following on from this is the continual encouragement to 'help the nation'. In practical terms this means diverting the energies previously directed towards 'making merit' as a means toward personal spiritual progress (which incidentally acquired social prestige in the community) into productive channels aimed at improving the economic and political performance of the community 'for the nation' (which, it is intended, should be the new criterion for gaining social prestige).

One of the immediate consequences of the greatly increased administrative control over the activities and movements of the population has been a remarkable reduction in criminal and deviant behaviour in the towns. As already reported, many of those suspected of being involved in crime were just rounded up and shipped off for 're-education'. It was not to prove so easy to eliminate the unemployment and under-employment, nor the inadequacy of wages and salaries, which had been at least partly responsible for the development of these social problems in the first place.

One of the greatest setbacks to the new regime has been the gradual realisation of the social gulf that separates those who spent the war years on different sides. Many Lao had said that once the Lao got back together again, they would have no problems in getting on well. This turned out to be an unrealistic hope. Nearly 30 years of separate development has produced people who use different vocabularies, think and behave differently. While there is excellent material here for a comparative study of social change, the most immediate results have been many examples of distrust, mutual suspicion and misunderstandings. These problems have led the new leaders, nervous perhaps of their position in the enemy's capital, to resort to procedures such as summary arrests and imprisonment.

Part of these difficulties undoubtedly derive from the important role which the ethnic minorities played in the Pathet Lao victory. The areas controlled by the Pathet Lao throughout the war were those where the various Mon-Khmer speaking minorities were in the majority. Although the top Pathet Lao leadership remained predominantly ethnic Lao, a high proportion of the middle level cadres whose task it is to administer the newly 'liberated' zones are inevitably from the minority groups which many valley Lao think of as inferior beings. They had not realised that welcoming the Party of Prince Souphanouvong would mean listening to long political lectures from people they consider to be barely literate and certainly totally without any 'real education'.

Whatever the long term future of the Lao people and the country of Laos, these difficulties and divisions will take a long time to resolve and heal. Meanwhile, one cannot help being most sorry for those people who have felt obliged to flee their country and seek refuge in foreign cultural surroundings. Lao often say that they are more attached to their homeland than other peoples. One can only hope that

some of the thousands who have left will eventually feel able to return in peace.

APPENDIX 2 SUMMARY LIST OF PRINCIPAL KINGS OF LAOS AND THEIR DATES[1]

The Lao chronicles begin with the names of 35 kings for whom no dates are given, and about whom almost nothing is known. They include at No. 13 Khun-Lo, the son of Khun Burom, the mythical founder of the Lao kingdom (see Chapter Two), who follows a number of Kha, or Mon-Khmer, names. The list ends with Souvanna Khamphong, who was to be deposed by his grandson, Fa Ngum, in 1353.

Kings of Lan Xang

1. In Luang Prabang

Fa Ngum	1353-1373
Samsenthai	1373-1416
Lan Khamdeng	1416-1427
Kham Keut	1435-1438
Sai Tiakaphat	1438-1479
Visoun	1501-1520
Photisarath	1520-1548

2. In Vientiane

Setthathirath	1548-1571
Thammikarath	1596-1622
Souligna Vongsa	1637-1694
Sai Ong Hue	1700-1707

Kings of Vientiane[2]

Sai Ong Hue (nephew of Souligna Vongsa)	1707-1735
Ong Long	1735-1760
Ong Boun	1760-1778
In	1792-1805
Anou	1805-1828[3]

Kings of Luang Prabang

Kitsarat (grandson of Souligna Vongsa)	1707-1726
Inthasom	1727-1776
Anouroth	1791-1817
Manthathourat	1817-1836
Oun Kham	1872-1887
Zakarine	1894-1904
Sisavang Vong	1904-1959
Savang Vatthana	1959-1975[4]

Kings of Champassak

Soi Sisamout (nephew of Souligna Vongsa)	1713-1737
Saya Koumane	1737-1791
Chao Houy	1826-1840[5]
Kham Souk	1863-1900

Notes

1. Based on Le Boulanger (1931) and Dommen (1971), in which complete lists can be found.

2. See Chapter Two for a summary of the events surrounding the split into three kingdoms.

3. The defeat of Chao Anou brought direct rule over Vientiane by the Siamese.

4. King Savang Vatthana abdicated in December 1975. The Head of State of the new Lao People's Democratic Republic is President Souphanouvong.

5. After 1840 the kings of Champassak were appointed by the Kings of Siam, and installed as provincial governors, until Champassak came under full French protection in 1907.

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The second part is a list of all the works referred to in the text, apart from those on Laos.

Abbreviations used:

ASEMI	Asie du Sud-Est et Monde Insulindien
BARL	Bulletin des Amis du Royaume Lao
BEFEO	Bulletin de l'Ecole Française d'Extrême Orient
BIIEH	Bulletin de l'Institut Indochinois pour l'Etude de l'Homme
BSEI	Bulletin de la Société des Etudes Indochinoises
CNRS	Centre National de Recherche Scientifique
EFEO	Ecole Francaise d'Extrême Orient
JCA	Journal of Contemporary Asia
JSS	Journal of the Siam Society
PRL	Présence du Royaume Lao (publ. France-Asie)
USAID	United States Agency for International Development

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GLOSSARY

(For the system of transcription used, see the Note on page xii)

Transliteration	Lao	Translation
ā	ອາ	aunt (FyZ)
āi	ອ້າຍ	elder brother
āi khīng	ອ້າຍຄ້ຶ	'real' brother (of same parents)
āi nǭng	ອ້າຍນ້ອງ	relatives (lit: 'elder brother, younger sibling')
ao	ເອົາ	take
ao mia	ເອົາເມັ	take a wife
āo	ອາວ	uncle (FyB)
bān	ບ້ານ	village, home
bān nǭk	ບ້ານນອກ	countryside
bāo	ບ່າວ	young adolescent (male)
bāo khōei	ບ່າວເຂ້ຍ	best man (in marriage ceremony)
bāp	ບາບ	sin, fault
bāsī	ບາສີ	Baci ceremony (to honour a respected person on special occasions)
bǭ pen nyang	ບ່ເປັນຫຍັງ	never mind, it doesn't matter
bun	ບຸນ	merit (spiritual); festival
bun bang fai	ບຸນບັ້ງໄຟ	Rocket festival
bun phavēt	ບຸນພຣະເວດ	Bun Phravet
burān	ບຸຣານ	ancient, antiquity
bū'ang lang	ເບ້ືອງຫລັ	"skeleton in the cupboard" (lit: side behind)
chān	ຈານ	lay title given to monk who attained 2nd ("Somdet") grade
chao	ເຈ້ົ	prince; you (pronoun)

chao khǭng kamphāeng nakhǭn	เจ้าของกำแพงนะคอน	municipal governor, mayor
chao mū'ang	เจ้าเมือง	district governor; prince of a principality
chao nāi	เจ้านาย	senior official
chao uparāt	เจ้าอุปราช	Viceroy, Second King
chua	จิว	novice monk
hā	หา	look for, seek
hā kin	หากิน	search for food, make a living
hai	ไร่	field, 'ray' (slash-and-burn)
haksā	รักสา	protect, take care of
het	เร็ด	do
het bun	เร็ดบุน	make merit (spiritual)
hǭ	ห่ำ	small sacred building
hǭ phī	ห่ำผี	spirit-house, residence of guardian spirits
hua nā	หัวหน้า	head, chief
hua nā khum	หัวหน้าคุ้ม	'ward' leader (in post-revolutionary administration)
hua nā nuai	หัวหน้าหน่วย	'unit' leader (in post-revolutionary administration)
kam	กัม	'karma', 'merit or demerit resulting from actions
kammakān	กัมมะการ	committee member
kamphāeng nakhǭn	กำแพงนะคอน	municipality, city
kathin	กะถิน	Kathin festival, at which monks receive new robes
khā	ข้า	'Kha' (used to designate hill-tribe minorities); slave
khāen	แคน	Khene, musical instrument - Pan's pipes
khanōi	ข้อย	I (pronoun of inferior to superior)
khap	ขับ	sing

khap ngu'm	ຂັບງຶ	sing in the Ngum style (north of Vientiane)
khārāsakān	ຂ້າຣາຊການ	civil servant (lit: slave of the king)
khī thī	ຂີ້ຖີ	mean, avaricious
khōei	ເຂີຍ	in-law (male)
khūaeng	ແຂວງ	province
khūam hū	ຄວາມຮູ້	knowledge
khū bā	ຄູບາ	monk (Buddhist)
khum	ຄຸ້ມ	ward, quarter (of a town)
khū'	ຄ່	similar, appropriate
kin dōng	ກິນດອງ	celebrate a marriage
kū	ກູ	I (pronoun - familiar)
lai (rai)	ໄຮ່	field, measure of area = 1,600 m²
lak mū'ang	ຫລັກເມືອງ	post marking the foundation of the city
lam	ລຳ	sing
lān	ຫລານ	nephew, niece, grandchild
lān sāo	ຫລານສາວ	niece, granddaughter
lāp	ລາບ	a dish of minced meat
lathabān	ຣັຖບານ	government
lĭang	ລ້ຽງ	feed
lĭang phī	ລ້ຽງຜີ	feed the spirits
lin sāo	ຫລິ້ນສາວ	to go courting girls
lūk lān	ລູກຫລານ	descendants (lit: children/ grandchildren)
lūk lĭang	ລູກລ້ຽງ	adopted child
lūk nōng	ລູກນ້ອງ	subordinates (lit: children/ younger siblings)
lūk sāi	ລູກໄຍ	son
lung	ລຸງ	uncle (FeB, MeB)

māe	แม่	mother
māe hū'an	แม่เฮือน	housewife
māe līang	แม่ลี้	foster mother, adopted mother
māe nyok	แม่ยิก	'mother' sponsoring candidate for Buddhist ordination
māe tū	แม่ตู้	grandmother
mia nōi	เมียน้อย	junior wife, mistress
mǭ	หมอ	practitioner of a speciality, doctor
mǭ cham	หมอจ้ำ	officiant at the cult of the village guardian spirit
mǭ mon	หมอมิ	specialist of chanting incantations (magic)
mǭ phǭn	หมอพอน	the celebrant at a sū khuan
mōen	หมื่น	ten thousand; rank in traditional administration (below sāen)
muan	ม่วน	amusing
mū'ang	เมือง	country, city, principality, district
mū'ang lān sāng hom khāo	เมืองล้านช้างร่มขาว	Land of the Million Elephants and the White Parasol (Laos)
mu'ng	มึง	you (pronoun, familiar)
nā	น้า	relative of junior line on mother's side
nā bāo	น้าบ่าว	uncle (MyB)
nā sāo	น้าสาว	aunt (MyZ)
nāi bān	นายบ้าน	village headman
nak sū'p	นักสืบ	investigator, spy
nang	นั่ง	sit
nang tam	นั่งต่ำ	sit 'low' - not in place of honour
nang thoeng	นั่งเทิง	sit 'high' - in place of honour
nēn	เณร	novice monk (Buddhist)

nēo lāo hak sāt	ແນວລາວຮັກຊາດ	Neo Lao Hak Sat - The Lao Patriotic Front
ngan	ງານ	a wake; the 'cour d'amour' - improvised singing featured at traditional festivals and wakes
ngoen	ເງິນ	money
nǭng	ນ້ອງ	younger sibling
nū'a	ເໜືອ	north
nyā māe	ຍາແມ່	respected mother
nyuttitham	ຍຸດຕິທັມ	justice
ǭk pai	ອອກໄປ	go out
pā	ປ້າ	aunt (FeZ, MeZ)
pā	ປ່າ	forest
pā	ປາ	fish
pacham bān	ປະຈຳບ້ານ	belonging to the village
pā dāek	ປາແດກ	fish paste (fermented)
pai nam	ໄປນຳ	go with, follow
paphēnī	ປະເພນີ	traditions
pen phī nǭng	ເປັນພີ່ນ້ອງ	to be related
phā	ພາ	tray, table
phā khuan	ພາຂວັນ	'tray of the souls' (on which offerings to personal 'souls' are placed)
phai	ໃພ້	in-law (female)
phanyā	ພຍາ	title of nobility and high ran
phī	ຜີ	'spirits', demons, etc.
phī bān	ຜີບ້ານ	village spirit
phī haksā bān	ຜີຮັກສາບ້ານ	guardian spirit of the village
phī haksā mū'ang	ຜີຮັກສາເມືອງ	guardian spirit of the town
phī khun vat	ຜີຄຸ້ມວັດ	guardian spirit of the vat
phī nǭng	ພີ່ນ້ອງ	relatives

phia	เพี้ย	title of nobility below phanyā
phithī thū'namphra-phiphatsatchā	พิธีถือน้ำพระพิพัดสัจจา	ceremony of oath of loyalty to the king
phǭ	พ่อ	father
phǭ bān	พ่อบ้าน	village headman
phǭ khā	พ่อค้า	merchant
phǭ līang	พ่อเลี้ยง	foster father, adopted father
phǭ māe	พ่อแม่	parents (father/mother)
phǭ māe phū thao	พ่อแม่ผู้เฒ่า	elders (parents/old people)
phǭ nā	พ่อนา	farmer
phǭ nyok	พ่อยก	'father' sponsoring candidate for Buddhist ordination
phǭ tū	พ่อตู้	grandfather
phra	พระ	prefix indicating 'sacred', 'monk', 'royal'
phraphuttachao	พระพุทธเจ้า	Buddha
phraphuttachao-luang	พระพุทธเจ้าหลวง	the Late King
phua	เมีย	husband
phut dai bai, phahat dai māk	พุธได้ใบ พะหัดได้หมาก	Wednesday brings leaves, Thursday brings fruit (grain)
piap	ปลาบ	personal honour, amour-propre, etc.
pū nyā tā nyāi	ปู่ย่าตายาย	ancestors
rāsadǭn	ราสดอน	the people
sābān tua	สาบานตัว	to swear (under oath)
sāen	แสน	one hundred thousand; rank below phia
sāi	ชาย	male
salāt	สลาด	intelligent, ingenious, cunning
sālavat	สาละวัด	official of the vat committee
sāmakhī	สามัคคี	to unite

samākhom	สะมาคม	association
samian	สมุม	secretary (to village headman)
sammanō khǭp khua	สำมะโนครอบครัว	register of families
sangkha	สังฆะ	'Sangha' - the community of Buddhist monks
saphā	สะพา	assembly, Parliament
sāo	สาว	female
sīu	สู่	close friend
sommā	สิมมา	make homage (to parents or superiors)
suan	สวน	garden
sūkhuan	สู่ขวัญ	ceremony 'invitation to souls' - the core of all rites of passage
sūkhuan khao	สู่ขวัญข้าว	ceremony in honour of rice
sū'a chao	เชื้อเจ้า	royal lineage
tāeng ngān	แต่งงาน	celebrate a marriage
tai	ใต้	south
tak bāt	ตักบาตร	give food to monks on morning begging round
tālāeo	ตาแหลว	sign indicating that village is out of bounds to strangers
tāsāeng	ตาแสง	Tasseng, sub-district; chief of a sub-district
thān	ท่าน	you (pronoun, respectful); sir, mister
thāo	ท้าว	general title of middle class (male)
thao kāe	เถ้าแก่	old; elders; the boss
thāo khun	ท้าวขุน	mandarin, senior official
thēt	เทศ	preach
tī khī	ตีคี	ceremonial game similar to hockey

ū'ai	อ้วย	elder sister
van sin	วันสิน	holy day
vat	วัด	Buddhist temple, monastery, wat
viak	เวียก	work, activities
yū bān	อยู่บ้าน	stay at home