

PREFACE

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Thongsar Bouapha is a young Lao field assistant working with "Pop" Buell and myself in Xieng Khouang and Sam Neua Provinces. We are primarily concerned with the Meo people (because of their numerical superiority) and we have naturally developed a deep interest in the history, customs, and culture of this fascinating group of people.

Thongsar has worked for several years in Xieng Khouang Province and has become quite proficient in the Meo language. "Pop", realizing both Thongsar's ability to communicate with the Meo and his talent at "spinning a yarn", asked him to research these areas of interest and record his findings for those who might find them informative and useful in their work.

After Thongsar completed writing The Story of the Meo-People, with his permission I tried to edit this paper which I considered a classic. I have made changes only in punctuation and a very few words which I hope will improve the "readability" of this story. I have in no way tried to change or contaminate the style and colorfulness of Thongsar's writing.

This is Thongsar's story. It is also an accurate interpretation of the Meo legend and history.

The Story of the Meo People

"Men who work up the hill or up the mountain should know and read the story of Meo people for their good cooperation to get along with the Meo people, who are mountaineers."

Questions are as follows:

1. Where and how did the Meo people bear from?
2. Where did the Meo people move from the first time?
3. Why did the Meo people move away?
4. What did the Meo people get a trouble on their long journey from places to places?
5. What profession did the Meo people like best?
6. What religion did the Meo people worship most?
7. What is the exactly custom of their birth, old age, pains, death, and marriage?

PLEASE

You must read with your one opened eye and listen with your one opened ear! In the present there is one old man who is staying at Nam Chong, his name is a father Sai Vue. He is seventy years old; he has six sons, but his sons are still alive, just two of them only, and he has had only one wife. Right now he is staying alone, his wife has passed to the paradise already for twenty years ago. He is a one man who told me the whole story of the Meo people. He said that when he was a young boy his old parents told the story like this.....

CHAPTER I - The Beginning

In the olden day, was about five thousand years ago, there was only one land, the land was very small like the trace of the deer. There was only one tree, the tree was very small like the smallest candle. There was also only one hermit who stayed on that land. When the age of that hermit was one thousand years old

he took clays to make one man and one woman by his own magic, a man whose name was Phaou Sank See, and a woman whose name was Ya Sank Sar. Both of them stayed together for many and many years. They have had only one son and their son's name was Sin Sai. He was a powerful, grateful, and kindly man.

When a Phaou Sank See and a Ya Sank Sar were too old, their ages were about five hundred years old, on that time the hermit said to them that, "Right now we have only one land, this land is keeping bigger and bigger. I would like to make the both of you to be twelve families with fulling of people, and each family has to stay in the different directions of this small land." When the hermit said so, then he killed those two of Phaou Sank See and Ya Sank Sar and he cut them in twelve pieces of their both body. He also have put pieces of those two people in the different places with making houses to cover. The hermit covered those pieces for only one night. The hermit sat to make his own magic all night for those pieces to become families of people. So in the morning of the next day the hermit stood up and looked at every house of these pieces of two people. He saw every piece of those two people in those houses that he put them in. All of those became men and women altogether.

Immediately the hermit was too glad that he saw his really good magic become the truth in what he wanted to wish, and then in a few moments he had vanished away from those men's world to go to stay in the paradise of God or Lord. But those men and women, they stayed in their own houses together which the hermit made up for them. They also got their own marriage. When the land of those people got bigger and bigger and they stayed in separate groups until today. Therefore, right now there were many kinds of people, many kinds of countries and many kinds of continents in this man's world by those people stayed in separate places. Meo people, they said that they were one kind of those people who the old hermit made them up.

Now come back to chat about the son of two people, Phaou Sank See and Ya Sank Sar. When the age of Sin Sai was about twenty-five years old, his own town was very much trouble about the big bad giant who it wants to kill him and take his town away. Well, that giant, it tried to kill him for many, many times, but Sin Sai he was a very powerful, grateful, and kindly man. That giant could not do anything to him by his own wishing. In one day Sin Sai, he thought that if he will not kill that giant, that giant will make a big trouble, eat people and kill many people in this Man's world. So Sin Sai, he sent the message to that big bad giant that he wants to make a war with it.

In the same day when the big bad giant received Sin Sai's message, it was very angry. Its both eyes were red like the fire hell. On that day the big bad giant could not stay on its house. It growled and cried like the bad thunder. It went around the sky and it also transformed itself into thousands and thousands of small giants for making a war with a great Sin Sai who was a son of two people, Phaou Sank See and Ya Sank Sar.

Sin Sai he never care about those bad giants. Sin Sai, he said in his mind with thinking that, "Oh! my dear old parents and my dear respecting hermit." Right now the big bad giant was very, very angry like it will cook a whole cow. Sin Sai, he himself said that I have to show my good tricks to those bad giants and kill all of them in three days. So Sin Sai he took grains of rice to put in his mouth and then he spit out all of grains of rice, and all grains of rice became soldiers by his good magical action. When Sin Sai he had soldiers ready and then he start to fight with all bad giants. Sin Sai, he and his all soldiers got a big fighting with those giants for three months.

At the end of the third month his soldiers killed all small giants, except the big bad giant only one left. Sin Sai, he himself fought with that giant for three days and then he killed it dead with his a powerful arrow. When the giant shot the arrow to Sin Sai, the giant's arrow became the flower to respect Sin Sai. But when Sin Sai shot his powerful arrow to that giant, the Sin Sai's arrow cut the giant's throat in pieces and then that big bad giant died.

Well, when all of bad giants including the big bad one had died altogether, Sin Sai he said that, "If I shall stay in men's world, there is no use at all for me. I have to go to kill bad giant or bad spirits at the other world." When he finished his saying like that, he called all his soldiers come. He briefed them and give them a good compliment that they got win of fighting with all bad giants.

The last word of his saying to his all soldiers, "I have to leave you all soldiers in man's world, and you all will not forget to stay on the high hill, because when I am not here, there might have many bad giants or spirits will come to make you all trouble; and also you all are my powerful soldiers and have to wait for me until I will come back to stay with you people again!" When Sin Sai he finished his saying he burnt himself away in one minute.

So right now all Meo people said they are one kind of Sin Sai's soldiers. They said that they are afraid of many bad giants and bad spirits very much. They will come to make them sick and trouble. Therefore they always stay up the high hill or mountain. They will not go to stay on the plate ground exactly because Sin Sai who was their old boss will come back to stay with them. They are also afraid of taking a bath too, because they said that there might have many bad spirits in water. If they will go down in water, the spirits will eat them up.

CHAPTER II - Leaving the Old Land

In many thousand years ago, the first city of the Meo people was in the land of the Moeng Haow people (Chinese land). The name of their city was Moeng Mon Hava or Ton Kong which was a big city and progressive country too. But, many thousand years ago, the Meo people moved from their old place to the other places. They immigrated to one part of Chinese land which was close to the Vietnamese border. The name of that place was Moeng Toi Lar. They said this place stood on the bank of big river. That river has four colours; red, black, green and yellow. They also said that place was the end of Mekong river and they kept moving and moving more and more until they got to Laos, and are still moving today. They said they spent days and nights, almost thirty-five years before they reached Laos because they tried to make a new home everywhere, but they got a bad fortune.

The reasons of their moving. They said in their own land there were many people stayed in the same place. It was a kind of scanty country too and they said that there was a man who came from Laos. He went to tell them that in Laos there were many golds, silvers and other properties. Therefore the Meo people moved in Laos and they stayed at the area of Sam Neua first before they moved in the Xieng Khouang areas until today.

The difficulty or trouble of their moving from places to places. They said when they got moving from the first place, they fought with the Haow and Chinese people on a long journey at Moeng Mon Hava until they reached Moeng Toi Lar. When they got moving for the second time from Moeng Toi Lar, they said they fought with Vietnamese people until they got to the area of Laos. They also said at their first moving they have had two thousand people who moved together. When they got arriving in the area of Laos, and they counted their own people, there were only one thousand people who were still alive. They said that during their fighting with the enemies they did have nothing except their sticks, sharpened knives, sharpened rocks, their own Meo rifle, their own feet, and their hands. They did not stop to move to their

big aim of their destination until today. They said to themselves that, "Where is a will, there is a way".

CHAPTER III - The Good Custom

The good profession of the Meo people. They said they like to do farmings; to plant rice, corns, and vegetables on the high hill. Some of them make a merchandise and there are a few of them which are merchants per each village. Only one thing that the Meo people like to plant most and best, that is the Opium for all their lives. They said that the Opium is a kind of best medicine for everything in their bodies. The staple diet of the Meo people, that is the white rice and corns. They eat rice and corns with fresh water and boiling vegetable.

The religion that the Meo people believes and worship most, that is the spirit and fire worshipping because they said their old grandparents have passed or died already. The soul and the spirit of those old grandparents are still staying with them in the house for taking care of their children and themselves forever. Those spirits they called "house Spirits". But they said there are many kinds of spirits and each kind of spirits - their actions are not the same. Some of them want to eat only fried meat of buffaloes and cows and their businesses are not the same either. Some of the spirits just take care of the baby only. They said the spirits for which they cared most, that is the house spirits, because house spirits are more important than any kind of spirits in their religion. There is no limitation of changing their own religion. Supposed that they did not like the spiritism and fire-worshipping because they said all spirits want to eat many things and all spirits made them a poor and sick people; right now some of the Meo people became a Christian and the other kinds of religions.

About their old education. They said at a long time ago the Meo people did not have the school, but they studied the story of everything that has happened to them from their parents telling. They have many kinds of different pronunciations of their language, because they have many kinds of Meo people like the group of Meo Khaow (White Meo people), and Meo Laeye (coloured Meo people), and so on. Right now all kinds of the Meo people have the school to study Lao language and some other subjects. They know to write Lao language and speak the right Lao word. Their old language, they said, did not have writing language except speaking and talking. Right now they are having their own Meo language for writing, and for speaking a right Meo word, that their own boss or their respected King made up.

The custom of Meo people marriage. When the Meo people will get a marriage, they have a custom with each other in two ways. One way a boy goes to talk with girl. When both of them are pleased to agree with each other then the boy has to kidnap the girl away from her house without her parents knowledge to go to stay in the boy's house for three days already. Then both of them come back to make a ceremony at girl's house. But they said this way it costs too much, because they both break law of their old grandparents' spirits, a boy has to buy more chickens and more pigs than the other way.

In the other way a boy goes to talk with a girl. When a girl agreed to get a marriage with him, he came back to tell his parents to go to talk with a girl's parents. If the both sides of those families have agreed with each other, well, one person, who is the head of the boy's family or the girl's family, has to go to talk with a fortune teller that in what day will be best for them to get a marriage. They must also invite the fortune teller to come to be an old guest for briefing the boy and the girl how they can get a happy long life with each other. They said that the Meo people cannot get a marriage in the waning phase of the moon because the waning phase of the moon is a bad luck - and they can get a good marriage only in the waxing phase of the moon at any day. When they fixed the day and the month to get a marriage already, then they set up the party. The way that they do is as follows:

The boy has to pay for a girl to the girl's parents. He must get four really silver bowls that weigh about one kilogram for his girl. He must get two big pigs for his father-in-law and mother-in-law to raise instead of their daughter. He must get seven chickens; one chicken is for his girl-wife to kill for a party, two chickens are for his father-in-law and mother-in-law to kill to eat, two chickens he must kill for a party, two chickens he must give to his father-in-law and mother-in-law to raise in their house forever. He must also get two big jars of Meo whisky for his friends and other guests to drink.

At the end of this ceremony the boy's parents, the girl's parents, and the fortune teller have to educate them in the way of their old custom - how a husband will do with a wife, and how a wife will make a good practice to her husband for all her life. A wife has to go to stay with her husband in all periods, not stay in the girl's parents house because they said the boy already bought her.

When they did not like to stay with each other they can part easily. But if a girl or a wife wants to get a separating away from a boy or a husband then she has to pay to the boy what the boy paid for her to her parents before in their marriage. One thing they did not have is a law to get wives. One man can get five or ten wives, this depends on him. They said if they got much power and rich, they will not count to get five or ten wives, they have to get twenty wives because they said that they are a big boss in the whole family and let all their wives to get to work on the high hill. But for themselves, they said they stay in a house to take care of babies, smoke the opium and sleep.

The exactly custom of their birth. Supposed that one of them got a wife in their family. When that man's wife got a new baby the head of the family has to go to call a good-spirit teller come to see and visit a baby after a baby has born for three days. When the spirit teller already come, he told the head of a family to kill two chickens and one pig for making a ceremony of a baby and for offering to the house spirits to eat. When they made a ceremony of a new baby the spirits teller said many things to the house spirit for taking good care of a new baby in the future.

About pains and sicknesses of the Meo people. Suppose that one of them in their family is getting or having a sickness. The head of a family has to go to tell or to call one old spirit teller to come to make the examination of a patient that the spirit teller can tell exactly what kind of animals the spirit wants to eat. Then the head of a family has to do in according to the order of the spirit teller.

Supposing that the spirit wants to eat a pig. A head of a family has to kill a big pig to offer that spirit for its eating, and when a head of a family has killed a pig already, he has to tell that old spirit teller. Then at the same time the old spirit teller holds the dead pig and goes around that sick person with holding the dead pig and saying a spirit's words for three times. The spirit teller must make sure to say many good stuffs to the spirit, which is still sticking in the body of that sick person, by his old Meo language. When he finished his saying to the spirit in the sick person, then he puts a dead pig in front of a main gate of a patient's house, or behind the body of that sick person, including the flower, many grains of rice, candles and something else. At the same moment the spirit teller comes

back to sit on a chair behind the sick person and starts to make a spirit word for getting rid of that spirit away from the body of that sick person, while he holds two noisy bells. He also makes a really shaking of himself at the same time with saying and holding the two noisy bells. He did like that about two or three hours at least and then he stops. When he stopped to shake up himself, he comes back to make approval of that sick person with a touching the patient's body by his own hand. On that time he will know that the patient will be well or not well or the bad spirit did go away from that sick person or not.

Some of those spirit tellers, when they are making a spirit saying, they will not let anybody go to see and talk with a patient or get in that patient's house for a day. That is for the bad spirit to take itself away from the body of that sick person soon.

About the old age of the Meo people. Supposed that if men or women are going too old, about sixty or seventy or eighty years old, they have to try to smoke more opium and more tobacco for their good health - because they said the opium will make them to stay longer, stronger, and keep them healthier. If somebody told them to stop to smoke the opium, they will laugh at that one in a minute. When they were too old there are few of them did not smoke the opium and tobacco - among the thousand of the Meo people on the high hill.

The death of the Meo people. Supposing that there is one person in their family got death. His sons, or his father, or his close relations, come out of their house with holding their own Meo rifle to shoot to the sky for three times. The reasons of that shooting, there are two meanings. One meaning that they shoot for their neighbors, or all people in the same village, to know that a person who stayed in that house already died; and the other meaning of that shooting is for making a good way for the soul or spirit of that dead person to go well. Then one other person in the same house of a dead person will change clothes of that dead person with new dressings. They also keep the dead body of that person in the middle of the house for sometimes one day or two days or three days or one month at most, but these things depend on the poor or rich family.

Well, now all people that are in the same family of that dead person have to make a suffering and crying for three days for the soul or spirit of that dead person to stay with their children, or all relations, and themselves, to prevent the dead spirit or bad giant from coming to make them a big trouble and sick.

Then they take a dead body of that person away from their home. But one of the good spirit tellers has to go to the jungle somewhere first for finding a good place to bury that dead body. When he already found that, he came back to tell all of a dead person's relations to take that dead body away to bury. Also, they have to bury that dead body at the place which has to be far away from their own house, about five hundred meters at least. When they already buried that dead body all relations of that dead person have to put the flower, candle, rice-bowl, spoon, cross-bow, broken Meo rifle and other equipments on the top of that grave and they all go away. That is all.

These whole stories made up by Thongsar.