

THE PATHET LAO AND CHANGE IN
TRADITIONAL ECONOMIES OF THE
MEO AND KHA, 1958-61 *

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POLITICAL rivalry and power struggles in Laos during the last few years have had significant repercussions among two major minority groups within Laos. Alliances between the Pathet Lao forces and the Meo and Kha tribes have disrupted not only traditional tribal economic systems, but have had detrimental effects on social structure, trade institutions, and traditional value systems.¹ While the current situation is partly due to 60 years of dissatisfaction with colonial rule, it has been greatly intensified by political activities within the last 15 years.² The causes for this increased economic and social disruption may be clearly seen by comparing traditional economic systems with those prevalent among the Kha and Meo today as well as by viewing the role played by the Pathet Lao in precipitating economic change.³

The Meo economy is characterized by two factors; (1) swidden cultivation of upland *hai* rice supplemented by the intercropping of tubers, maize, vegetables, etc., and (2) opium as a major cash or barter crop.⁴ Through the use of an extensive system of inter-

* The material and observations included in this paper were collected from 1958-61 while the author was serving with the U.S. Army in Thailand, Laos, and South Vietnam.

¹ In Lao the term *Kha* means slave. It is a general term used to refer to all aboriginal Indonesian peoples of Laos. Recently the term *Lao-teng* has been used to refer to these people while more regional terms such as *Kha-muk*, *Khmu*, and *Kamu* are also used.

² Resistance to colonial rule among minority groups began as early as 1901 when the Kha of Champassak and Savannakhet revolted against excessive corvée, head taxes, and administrative restrictions. This revolt continued intermittently for 30 years and developed several charismatic leaders who later became important cadre in the Pathet Lao movement.

³ I wish to emphasize that the Meo and Kha are discussed here as general ethnic minorities in Laos, and that no attempt has been made to distinguish separate subdivisions within these minorities.

⁴ Rice cultivation in Laos is of two types: *Hai* or upland dry rice and *Na*

cropping, the Meo are able to provide a wide variation in food supply throughout the year, thus eliminating food shortages common to other groups who do not intercrop. Various grain and cereal crops form the basis of their diet and share the labor input with the cultivation of opium. Raw opium provides the Meo with a cash crop which allows them to enjoy a cash surplus, a situation uncommon to most other swidden cultivators in Laos. The value of opium is high on the local market and, whether exchanged for silver or bartered for consumer goods or food staples, it provides them with a noticeably higher income than other upland hill cultivators. Labor is divided according to sex, with the women performing most of the cultivation, harvesting, milling, and weaving. While opium addiction is high among the males it is not sufficient to inhibit them from taking an active role in Meo economic tasks. Another factor adding to their firm economic position is their skill in weaving, milling, smithing, and adapting waterpower for milling and irrigation. The skill of the Meo as herdsmen is well known through Laos and neighboring areas, although draft animals and swine are used only for labor and sacrificial purposes and are seldom eaten.

A variety of social and environmental factors adds to the economic stability of the Meo compared with other hill tribes. Settlements are located on mountain peaks and ridges above 3000 feet. They are highly consolidated and contain from 3 to 10 houses or household groups. While Meo villages are usually smaller in terms of total houses than either the Kha or lowland Lao they have almost twice as many individuals in one household than either of these groups. The high degree of consolidation in hamlet size among the Meo seems to have been a result of earlier defense needs. The family or household unit is an important factor in the Meo economy since each household is essentially a self-supporting unit based on a patriarchal extended family. This is primarily responsible for the smallness of hamlet size, the size of extended families, and the stability of the hamlet site. Their economic independence contributes to limitations in village size, mobility of household units, and diversity of economic endeavors.

Trade among Meo groups is a vital link in their economy and

or lowland wet rice cultivation. *Hai* cultivation is characteristic of swidden agriculture and involves no irrigation, while *Na* cultivation involves irrigation techniques.

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provides them with many necessary items as well as a source of disposal for their surplus food commodities and opium harvest. Traditionally, the hill tribes in northern Laos did the bulk of their trading through the *Lao Lum*, a rural middleman, who not only bought and sold produce, but extended credit, made loans, arranged marriages, started and settled disputes, and exacted the levies and taxes imposed by the colonial administration. The Meo have always limited their contact with the *Lao Lum* because of his colonial association and their inherent sense of pride and independence. The practice of debt slavery, common in Laos under the French, accompanied by their distrust of district *tasseng* and central administrative authority had tended to alienate most of the Meo from the *Lao Lum*.⁶ Meo trade has generally been conducted by single individuals dealing with either the lowland Lao or with other hill tribes.

In marked contrast to the Meo are the Kha or Khmu who exist in a different social and economic environment. The Kha may generally be considered as intermediate level dwellers, cultivating the slopes and low ridges below the Meo, but above the lowland Lao who occupy the river valleys and plains. Their economy is based primarily upon swidden cultivation with upland dry rice and maize as the major crops cultivated. In this *hai* or swidden cultivation without irrigation, the Khmu exist at only a subsistence level and are unable to establish any form of surplus, either cash or food. Opium is occasionally cultivated to supplement their income, but only when it can be grown in conjunction with some other hill tribe, and it does not constitute a major factor in their economy. The Kha, if sufficient lowland *na* area is available, may be found cultivating wet rice, although this is the exception rather than the rule. Forest produce and hunting and gathering techniques constitute a large part of the Kha economy, since, unlike the Meo, they have been unable to adopt the technique of intercropping and consequently suffer food shortages. These yearly famines are caused not only by the lack of intercropping, but also by their inability to master such techniques as milling and irrigation. Their further lack of skills in weaving, smithing, and husbandry forces them to

⁶The term *tasseng* refers to the subdistrict chief appointed as part of the administrative hierarchy established by the French. In 1898 the French subdivided the provinces of Laos into districts (*muong*), subdistricts (*tasseng*), and hamlet (*ban*) to facilitate political and economic control of the country.

rely on barter and trade to supply them with cloth, food items, tools, and so on, thus decreasing their degree of independence.

The status of Kha economic sufficiency is partly determined by existing social structure and village size. Their basic social unit is the house group based on the patrilineal extended family. While these groups are far smaller than those of the Meo, they have much larger villages with fewer individuals per house. The Kha concept of village differs radically from that of the Meo, who live in small compact hamlets. Kha villages may include several small groupings of houses scattered over a large area or separate houses distributed throughout an approximately square kilometer. The scattering of houses by the Kha reduces the efficiency of cooperative labor groups as well as individual house groups.

Within the past few years signs of assimilation by the lowland Lao have become evident among the Kha. Their village social structure and economic patterns have become more disrupted to accommodate qualities more characteristic of the lowland Lao. Patterns of dress, speech, values, loyalty, and filial responsibility have all given way in varying degrees. Labor for cash wages has begun to draw men away from their traditional agrarian setting to jobs as lumber workers, laborers, and servants for the lowland Lao. The desire for such commodities as kerosene lanterns, radios, and toothpaste among the Kha indicates a change in their traditional system of values. These trends in values, independence, and loyalty have become far more marked in recent years, principally as a result of Pathet Lao influence and political conflict in Laos.

The success of the Pathet Lao in gaining support and influence among the Kha and Meo has been due to four major factors: (1) influence of loyal Pathet Lao cadre among the Kha and Meo, (2) lack of a satisfactory Lao government policy toward minority groups, (3) inability of government forces to administer areas which had been under effective Pathet Lao control for over 10 years, and (4) implementation of effective Pathet Lao propaganda campaigns directed at arousing unrest and distrust among hill tribes, emphasizing common ethnic bonds among tribal minorities in Laos and Vietnam, promises of autonomous regions for ethnic minorities, and the use of force and violence.

By 1958, there was evidence of total or partial disruption of economic and social structures among the Kha and Meo as a result of Pathet Lao influence. The limited demographic observations and analysis I was able to make indicated that a 15 to 20% increase

over normal tribal movements had occurred. Large numbers of Meo and Kha were increasingly seen around provincial market and trade centers seeking work. The number of Meo found in lowland areas was far less than Kha, yet significant since Meo were previously seldom seen in lowland areas. In Nam Tha, approximately 30 Meo settlements were identified cultivating *na* rice where none had previously been. The reason most often given for their transition from *hai* to *na* cultivation was simply, "the Pathet Lao." The increase in Meo occupation in lowland areas and their concern for adopting wet rice cultivation and cash in return for labor indicates a trend toward a modified cash economy. Although opium is still the basis of Meo economy, there are indications of a readjustment of savings patterns and values more along western lines. The Meo have become increasingly interested in receiving "western consumer goods" as payment for their crops as opposed to traditional payment in silver bars, rings, and coins.⁹

These trends toward modification in values and savings patterns are more extensive among the Kha, who have traditionally been less independent. Assimilation of the Kha by the lowland Lao has been mentioned as early as 1958, and the impact of the Pathet Lao upon Kha society has tended to increase this assimilation.⁷ Kha values have shown a greater degree of change than those of the Meo with single names and disrupted family groups commonly found in urban lowland areas working as servants, laborers, clerks, and so on. The desire for "western consumer goods" has had a stronger impact upon the Kha with changes in dress, occupation, and values being the most noticeable. The adoption of western dress by urban Kha is a radical departure from their traditional garments. The Kha have more readily adopted wet rice cultivation than the Meo and may also be seen cultivating small tea plots and raising pigs as cash crops. While the adoption of *na* cultivation is dependent upon the availability of land, it was noticed that many young Kha men were working for cash wages in order to secure land for planting wet rice.

The most significant factor in Kha and Meo social disruption

⁹ See *Economic Development and American Aid*, Joel M. Halpern, Department of Anthropology, University of California (Los Angeles 1958), and *Village Life in Vientiane Province*, Howard K. Kaufman, USOM (Vientiane Laos 1956).

⁷ See *Aspects of Village Life and Culture Change in Laos*, Joel M. Halpern, Council on Economic and Cultural Affairs, Inc. (New York 1958).

has been the relocation and migration of extended families and house groups into the lowland areas. The initial impact of this has been the shortage of food in many urban centers. Evident in these dislocated and disrupted house groups has been the lack of males between the ages of 15 and 30 years. Investigation led to the conclusion that these men had joined or been conscripted by the Pathet Lao since no increase in this age group was observed. The absence of any headmen was also indicative of the degree of village disruption which had occurred. Pathet Lao propaganda is often focused on male heads of households and headmen, who are forced into debt slavery arrangements and then easily controlled or removed by Pathet Lao cadre. Once this traditional authority had been removed, it was an easy process to control cooperative village members or alienate uncooperative ones. Disruption of village authority has been more extensive among the Kha than the Meo since the Meo headmen are strong central figures within each hamlet while village authority is weak among the Kha. An equal disruption of household authority has occurred through the removal of authority from the village and kin structure. This has caused a shift in the basic socioeconomic unit among the Meo and Kha away from the household group and toward the family or kinship unit. A corresponding loss of tribal identity has occurred among the Kha, whose tribal bonds had previously been weak.

One possibly beneficial result of the political unrest among the Meo has been a modification of their attitudes toward authority and an increase in their participation in government military, taxation, and labor programs. This change is partly due to the efforts of the Lao government to establish a more active and effective policy toward minorities, especially the Meo.

The effects of the dislocation and resettlement of tribal peoples in Thailand, Burma, and South Vietnam where they have been viewed as threats to internal security are already visible in their loss of cultural identity, their shifts from economic independence to economic dependence, and the disruption of their traditional social structure. Equally evident has been the concomitant problems of urban food shortages, decline in urban-rural trade, lack of suitable land for settlement, and, ironically, increasing difficulty in maintaining internal security. On the basis of this evidence, it may be predicted that a prolongation of the political and military conflict in Laos will expand and intensify the disruption and dislocation of the tribal groups to the detriment of Laotian economic and political stability.