

Operation Brotherhood (OB) is a voluntary Filipino organization which operates hospitals and health services in Laos.



P O R T R A I T O F A L A O

On the cold morning of 7 January, we woke up, looked out the window, and saw a Lao walking down the misty street. We do not know his name, or what he does; we do not know if he is married or not; we do not know his family or his friends. But we do know what kind of a person he is; we have known him for 10 years.

On that cold morning, OB marked its 10th year of service in Laos -- a full decade to forge a companionship with the Lao into bonds of very intimate familiarity with his character. That much period of contact with him should be enough time to attempt distilling the more distinctive marks of his character; traits that are the sum of his accustomed personal, social and religious values and which altogether differentiate him from the Chinese or the Filipino, and which define him as a Lao

This then is the, OB Filipino's portrait of the Lao character, a picture that took 10 years in the making. The Lao he refers to belongs to the valley-dwelling natives most of whom have settled the lowlands along the Mekong and who are said to number one half of the kingdom's estimated two and a half million population. The picture therefore excludes the other half -- these who inhabit the mountain sides and its summits -- the Meo and the Tai tribes and their many subtribes. In the course of a decade there have been many occasions to familiarize the OB Filipino with the peoples of this other half of the nation but unfortunately the occasions have not been as many and the situations not as ideal and prolonged as those experienced with the valley Lao. He has been, for example, familiar with the aggressiveness and physical stamina of the Meo, the

unsophisticated curiosity of the Kha, but not much more about them, nothing perceptive about their attitudes and values, which this essay attempts to define about the Lao.

Among the very first to draw the Lao's portrait was a Genoese missionary, Father Giovanni Filippo de Marini, who wrote in 1667: "The Laotian people are, generally speaking, and as befits their climate and native country, very docile and very good natured and great lovers of rest and quiet; they pride themselves on their great in-genuousness and perfect sincerity, and sure enough they are most frank and sincere, without deceit, most humble and most courteous, of unalterable trustworthiness with regard to all things of what-ever sort that are entrusted to them ... very affable, accommodating, open to reason, and very respectful, neither quarrelsome nor obstinate, but obliging and submissive when they are approached in good faith..."

The good father, a true Christian, may have been too charitable. On the other hand, a 20th century commentary on the Lao by an anthropologist is not too charitable: "... (the Lao) does not value hard work as a means of improving his position...; compulsion, striving and urgency are lacking...; Westerners are struck by the lack of regularity, discipline and regimentation.

Admittedly, a true balanced picture should include both extremes of view. And herein lies a problem: one might absorb only one extreme view by constant companionship with one class of Lao society which manifests openly a characteristic or set of traits muted in another class. For Lao society like all societies, has its stratifications, where the ranking of classes is most obvious to any foreign observer.

There are the elite, the middle class, and the villager. The members of the elite, estimated in 1959 by the anthropologist at 2,000 persons from 200 families, hold one or more or all of the credentials which set them apart and above the other classes of Lao society. Almost all its members are fluent with French and are wise with French ways and culture -- the result of an education in France. A number are descendants of the royal families who reigned over the 3 kingdoms which used to compose Laos -- Vientiane, Luang Prabang and Champassak -- and who now bear the titles of Tiao or Chao before their names denoting their blue-blooded lineage. Royal blood and a French education (most especially the latter) qualify the elite, more than anybody else, for the top government positions, civilian and military, and today they occupy these posts. The third credential is money -- that which finances the education abroad, which in turn earns the skills to get the high-paying jobs and the talent to indulge in business -- all of which beget more of the money that assures perpetuity of the elite whose mantle of power is carried on by their children and

relatives.

The middle class was non-existent in pre-French colonial times when there were but two classes: the royalty (and their courtiers) and the peasants. The last decade saw the slow birth and growth of a middle class of junior grade government employees, army and police officers, and professionals (doctors, engineers, teachers, merchants) most of whom established their place in Lao society as more educational opportunities formerly open only to the elite, became available to others. Moreover, the army, the police, and the schools, by their wide recruitment of anybody interested in pursuing careers in these services, took into their ranks the ambitious and the talented from the masses who otherwise would have remained peasants. Some have penetrated the circle of the elite by marriage with its members but many did and shall venture into the elite preserve by sheer aggressiveness and competence.

Composing the third class and occupying the lowest rung in Lao society are the villagers. Scattered in hundreds of villages dotting the countryside, they have remained through the centuries the tillers of the soil and the fishers of the rivers, outnumbering by the thousands the elite and the middle class who are concentrated in the urban areas of Vientiane, Luang Prabang, Thakhek, Pakse and Savannakhet.

Whether prince, army captain or plain farmer, the Lao of any class exhibits the traits that mark him a Lao. The following are his more recognizable ones:

1. He has gentle manners and speaks with self-restraint. This is the first and lasting impression which strikes the foreigner. What "serene" people, he comments; "...even in the brink of disaster, (they) refuse to allow their placid...natures to be ruffled." This trait finds expression in non-exuberant, non-explosive gestures and in quiet speech. Their code of good behavior teaches that "wellbred people speak with moderation" and that "good behavior may be recognized by its being inoffensive to the eye". Their many and varied occasions for feast-making (like the bouns -- fund-raising fairs for their village temples, and sukhuans -- spirit-invoking ceremonies for newlyweds, new arrivals, departures, and those celebrating personal victory over injury and disease) are well-stocked with lau-lau (a searing rice wine) and imported whiskies; but seldom are these occasions marred by drunken behavior, however intimate and large the crowd. Two typical charming expressions of the modesty of their physical reflexes are their wai and the lamvong. The first is their traditional greeting gesture in which the hands

are joined ^{to} together in prayer-like fashion, then brought gracefully up the chin with a slight bow and a smile. The second is their national social dance: the dancers revolve in a large circle, their swaying hands and arms tracing languid patterns in the air, the feet shuffling in tiny, slow steps.

2. He is gay. "They seem to be rather jolly and one goes around pretty much with a smile on his face," a foreigner remarked, summarizing what the French -- the first foreigners to come in close contact with the Lao -- discovered for themselves. There is indeed much evidence of gaiety: the bouns and the sukhuans, in the city, town or village, are numerous, and the biggest, grandest annual festivals -- April's New Year and November's Boun That Luang--last for a week. The strain of gaiety runs deeper than these outward manifestations. The Lao, particularly the villager, is generally content with his life: a routine cycle of planting and harvesting, dictated by the rainy and dry seasons, and an in-between period of rest and odd chores. It is the traditional Asian agricultural way of life that he has not changed through the centuries and will not change because it has always been that way and he knows no other way. It is uncomplicated, not the ulcer-breeding, buck-hustling, status-seeking rat race of the industrial countries.

Moreover, the Lao rural inhabitant is blessed with much land for the taking and too few people to compete with for livelihood. The plot he tills year in and year out has sustained him and he knows it shall sustain his growing family with but a little more acreage hacked out of the surrounding abundant land; the rivers and the forests are bountiful; and if he suffers from malnutrition, he does not know it; there is always food around.

"He does not value hard work as a means of improving his position," one observer said. It is more true to say, as another observer wrote: "The Laotian is willing to work hard -- but only as hard as necessary." And there, perhaps, lies the core of his gay nature, for it is claimed that, to the Lao, increasing one's material possessions merely for the sake of accumulating surplus goods is not consonant with his Buddhist doctrine's emphasis on self-restraint and generosity. Surplus wealth should be for giving away, especially to the monks, for the purpose of acquiring and storing merit, known also as boun -- the absence of which damns you after death, or the surplus of which reincarnates you to a perfect, happier form of life, if while alive, you were solicitous in its quest and accumulation. "Giving, feasting, and gaiety are not only pleasurable to the Lao but eminently logical as well, for to him, the most readily grasped of the Buddhist tenets is its central

purpose of eradicating suffering, and pleasure is evidence of success in this pursuit." The image here should not be of a Lao who exists only for pleasure and leisure -- a satyr. Watch him at work with his hands in the fields, rivers and forests, without labor-saving machines, and the oft-repeated description of the "easy-going" Lao is shattered.

The Lao villager has no interest in affairs outside his village for rarely do these things affect his life to a degree that he would notice or understand. He smiles and laughs easily because there is much to laugh and smile about when one is content with one's state of existence.

3. His ties with his family are strong. A Lao saying goes: "When we go away, we lose our ground; when we leave one's house, we lose our columns" -- a reminder to the members of the family that blood should be thicker than the waters of the Mekong river. The binding ties that develop between the members of the Lao family are the very same sort that are forged in any family anywhere whose members practically live and die together generation after generation, in the same village. The village is the Lao's one and only world, whose confines he seldom leaves for good in his life-time; many of its 200 or so inhabitants are related to each other by blood or kinship.

Respect for one's superior in age -- the elder sister or brother and of course, for parents, and elders of the village -- is a lesson taught from childhood. To the elite, kinship, it seems, is more than a matter of blood; it demands perpetuation in power and prestige of a clan name. A study of contemporary Lao "Who's Who" reveals, again and again, the same 10 to 12 family names in the most important government positions since Laos was recognized as a nation. And it is common knowledge that these families and their matrix of relatives hold great sway over the country's destiny.

4. He is conservative, in the sense that he perseveres with his present system of life (actually ages old) because he finds it **fulfilling** what he considers all his needs. The new method or the alien idea is not easily accepted because his traditional way of doing things and of thinking have so far been satisfactory to him. (The elite and the middle class, enlightened by education, are not at all that conservative.) This characteristic is not peculiar to the Lao alone, for it also marks most Asians who value the old ways.

Having discovered four of the Lao's more significant character traits, the OB volunteer finds it not too difficult to adapt

himself to an encounter with a native, and to develop an acquaintance into a friendship, warm, brotherly and honest. The pitfalls become easy to avoid: not to be boisterous and loquacious ("when one is among vultures, one becomes a vulture" -- the Lao say); not to shun their festive, merit-making bouns; to respect elders, to recognize the rankings of classes; to go easy in forcing one's attitudes and conceptions. Soon he learns the finer do's and don't's of Lao etiquette: to return a wai with a wai; never, never to touch or point at another's head (the abode, the Lao believe, of the chief kuan, one of the 32 souls of the human body which flees when pointed at and causes its owner physical harm, such as sickness); not to show affecti publicly (even with your wife or husband); to announce one's entrance into a house with a cough and a respectful call, and not with a knock.

And as the OB Filipino is taken into the confidence of more and more representatives of each social class, he glimpses more facets of the Lao that glimmer deep in his character. He discovers for example that the Lao dislikes argument, seeks compromise, prefers to mask displeasing emotions under a polite pleasant manner. (He can be so polite he will tell you what you expect to hear even if it is not what you want to hear).

And then he learns that the key to the serenity, the pleasantness, the modesty, the compromising ways of the Lao lies in his Buddhist religion which exhorts the acquisition of these very same virtues for those who seek the peace of the Buddha. He values his religion so much that all Lao males are practically obliged to spend a period, however brief, of their life, as a monk inside the village wat. The monk, whatever his age, remains one of the most respected figures in the Lao community.

But the most satisfying discovery the OB Filipino has made after 10 years with the Lao is that he is a most hospitable host -- whose affection he lavishes on the OB member, now gone or now serving in his country, must not be tarnished with complacency, conceit or a patronizing attitude on the part of the OB volunteer.