

CHAPTER 6

Government and the Hill Tribes of Laos

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INTRODUCTION

The intention of this paper is to provide a condensed picture of the tribal peoples of Laos—of the conditions they live in today and what is being done to alleviate their hardships resulting from isolation, war, and a traditional lack of interest in their welfare and development. To give the picture its proper perspective, it should be mentioned that the writer has, to date, served twenty months in Laos as an adviser to the Royal Government on the administration of hill tribes. He has, therefore, not been specifically concerned with research and study of tribal groups, but more with their general administration and with bringing them practical help. It should not be inferred from this that the importance of research has been overlooked; on the contrary, the writer is fully aware that ideally and given normal conditions, research and study are necessary precursors to formulating administrative policy for tribal peoples and that, following this, research should continue to run parallel to development planning and its implementation. Regrettably, the situation in Laos has for many years precluded the launching of a balanced research program, and hence the information that is available from past anthropological and social studies devoted specifically to these problems is scarce.

For the purposes of this paper the writer has made the assumption that the readers have a fair understanding of the political vicissitudes of Laos over the past twenty years and have some knowledge of the current situation, which has inevitably affected the tribal peoples.

Although the contents of this paper are largely based on the writer's personal experience and observations, information from other sources has been included (e.g. statistical). In such cases

checks for accuracy have been made wherever possible. The opinions expressed, except where otherwise indicated, are personal to the writer. In the text the term "tribal" refers to hill tribes as distinct from the Lao.

POPULATION, ETHNIC DISTRIBUTION, AND LANGUAGES

The population of Laos (all races) is variously estimated in the absence of any formal census at between 1.75 and 2.3 million, of which approximately half are tribal peoples. The latter live at altitudes frequently in excess of 3,000 feet, in contrast to the Lao, who are lowlanders; hence, throughout the region the settlements of hill tribes and the Lao are in general clearly separated, with the Lao inhabiting the flat alluvial land adjacent to the Mekong and its tributaries and the tribal peoples living in or above the high valleys and on the high plateau.

The ethnic distribution of the hill tribes does not break down conveniently into regions, as many of them are scattered throughout the country. An example is the "Kha" (Laotian word for "slave") group of tribes (some fifty different tribal peoples). They form about 25 percent of the total population, and although the largest concentrations are in the northwest and south, small pockets are also found in central Laos. The Meo (Miao) and Yao (Man) tribes, on the other hand, which may total as much as 100,000 or 5 percent of the population, have to date confined themselves exclusively to the portion of Laos north of Vientiane. The so-called Tai tribes comprise about 16 percent, or 320,000 people, and live in widely scattered settlements chiefly in the mountain valleys of northern Laos. The three main tribes are Tai Dam (Black Tai), Tai Daeng (Red Tai), and Tai Khao (White Tai), but there are also Tai Phuan, Tai Neua, and Phou Tai (Phuthai). (These designations are made by the Lao according to the color of traditional costumes, location, or some other characteristics, real or imagined.)

The number of distinct languages and dialects spoken in Laos would be difficult to estimate, but the major division is between those who speak Tai languages and those who speak the Mon-Khmer languages. In the former group are included the Lao and the Tai tribes, and in the latter are the so-called Kha tribes or Lao Theung. The Meo and Yao speak languages of another

unrelated family. There is no lingua franca for all these groups other than Lao, which is known only to a relatively small percentage of the "Kha," Meo, and Yao tribal peoples. The Tai tribes, whose dialects may be akin to Lao, may find it easier to understand spoken Lao.

HISTORICAL AND CULTURAL BACKGROUND

The oldest groups in the area, the so-called Kha, are considered by the Lao to be the original inhabitants and owners of the land. Their primary claim to the land is symbolically recognized in ceremonies, like those held at Luang Prabang, in which the Kha are defeated in a game which represents the ancient contest between their ancestors and the Tai-speaking invaders. Other tribal groups, such as the Meo and Yao (or Man), are comparative newcomers to Laos, having arrived from the north, where the bulk of their population still remains, starting in about 1850.

Relationships between the Tribes and with the Government. The considerable differences in background of the multi-ethnic population of Laos, lack of a common culture and language, and economic inequalities inherent in the differences in habitats are not conducive to easy assimilation. For centuries the Lao have provided the governing class; and, although they have developed a degree of cultural, economic, and political unity among themselves (disregarding dynastic rivalries) they have had little interest in assimilating the non-Lao groups. Still, the tribes and minorities have not been isolated. Administrative relations with non-Lao people have been created through official recognition of local village headmen (*nai ban*) and district chiefs (*tasseng*) (see Barney's paper on political connections between Meo and Lao and Kandre's paper on connections between Yao and Lao).

There have also been extensive economic relationships between tribesmen and lowlanders. The role of the *lam* (who is an ethnic Lao middleman) developed to regulate trade between Khmu² and lowland Lao markets (Halpern 1964:94 ff.). The Meo engaged directly in the opium trade with Chinese traders and apparently also with the Lao (see Barney's paper). For years Khmu² and Lamet have worked in the Laotian lowlands and even in Thailand to earn money to buy prestige goods (drums and buffaloes) and other necessities (iron tools) (see

Izikowitz 1951). There are also ritual and symbolic interdependencies between hill people and lowlanders (Archaimbault 1964). But despite these many interconnections, the ethnic groups have tended to remain distinct.

Paradoxically, there is one factor arising from the civil war which may in time lead to a gradual breaking down of these inter-group barriers—the refugee problem and its solution. For the past twenty years or more Laos has been faced with the recurring influx of refugees from within its own borders. More recently this has become seasonal, for it results from Pathet Lao encroachments during the dry season (January to May). Thus in the majority of cases the refugees are tribal people who are ill-equipped to cope with the calamity of loss of home, possessions, and means of livelihood. The hill people, of course, are primarily shifting cultivators, but in the past their moves have been planned and orderly. The dry season is the time when they prepare their fields for planting after the harvest. If they cannot prepare their fields, they cannot plant a crop for the following year. The tribal people now find they have nowhere in the jungle to which they can retreat. Their fields and their homes are always subject to destruction.

In the past the degree of help they could expect depended largely on the region they happened to be in; if it was an area where a foreign agency or mission or its equivalent was operating in conjunction with Lao authorities, they would receive all the assistance available for immediate relief and long-term resettlement. In general this still applies. The U.S. AID refugee program, without which the situation would be disastrous, now supports some 150,000 refugees throughout the country. These are people who would be unable to subsist without periodic supplies of rice, clothing, medical supplies, etc. The majority of the refugees live in isolated areas that can be supplied only by air. U.S. AID and the Royal Lao Government activities are coordinated by the Social Welfare Adviser, U.S. AID, and the Director of the Social Welfare Department, Ministry of Social Welfare.

Outside these areas the circumstances were, and still are to some extent, different. For example, where tribal refugees happen to come to the attention of the local authorities (through fear,

ignorance, or pride, many tribal headmen do not take the initiative in reporting their predicament), they receive in theory an initial issue of food and welfare commodities such as rice, blankets, etc.; but after this they are left to fend for themselves. Small wonder then that one finds scattered throughout the country groups of tribal refugees who through Pathet Lao pressure have at some stage been forced to leave their normal habitat and seek refuge in or near the main centers of population. The more developed and industrious tribes endeavor to adapt themselves to their new environment. A few succeed, whereas others who lack strong leadership and assistance are unable to overcome their bewilderment and eke out a miserable existence.

In summary, until quite recently the Laotian government has largely ignored the problems of refugee relief, particularly those involving resettlement and rehabilitation. When it has dealt with them, it has done so on a purely *ad hoc* and regional basis without attempting to coordinate resources or formulate an overall policy. Of course it could be argued, and no doubt has been, that with an acute shortage of funds, bad communications, and many other fundamental deficiencies, refugee relief could not be accorded any priority. Besides, it clearly suited some political factions to discourage the introduction of a proper relief and resettlement program—starving refugees make a good talking point and a soft target for subversion.

However, late in 1962 the Royal Lao Government requested the United Nations to arrange for a survey to be made of refugees and demobilized soldiers; the latter were included because at that time it was hoped to reduce gradually the strength of the armed forces of the country as unification progressed under the Government of National Union. The survey was conducted in early 1963, and some of the recommendations in the subsequent report form the basis of a new national program for resettlement of refugees now being developed by the Ministry of Social Welfare under the guidance of a United Nations Resettlement Adviser.

A modest start has now been made within the limitations imposed by financial support for the program and trained personnel; but more significant is the fact that the importance of resettlement

ment properly planned and executed, and irrespective of the ethnic groups concerned, has at last been recognized by many in authority when hitherto it was understood only by a few.

Generally speaking, the resettlement and agricultural development programs in Laos are primarily for subsistence agriculture, owing to the poor communication system. There are, however, instances where a resettlement is located close enough to a town to make transportation economically feasible. In such cases the goal of agricultural development is a combination of production for both subsistence and for the local market. Virtually nothing has been done to develop markets either for the hill tribesmen or for the Lao, nor has there been any development of agricultural credit.

This particular facet of tribal administration, which is common to all countries of Southeast Asia to a greater or lesser degree, is being dwelt on at some length, since its satisfactory solution, in addition to improving the economy, health, and welfare of the tribal community concerned, can also go some way toward providing the answer to the main problem of bridging the gap between central governments and their tribal peoples. In other words, through the medium of resettlement and its accompanying benefits, the administrative machine becomes directly involved on a personal level with tribal people, possibly for the first time; and if this contact is made and developed with understanding and respect for tribal custom, beliefs, and tradition, it can hardly fail to improve relations.

At this point it seems appropriate to consider briefly what resettlement really means, as its connotation is evidently not always clearly understood. Resettlement is the planned process of bringing the human and land resources of a country together for social economic ends. The social objective is primarily the development of viable communities, and the economic objective is normally agricultural production. There are other temporary objectives in certain circumstances, such as providing security and insulation against militant Communism and subversion. Perhaps the best example of this was the vast resettlement program launched by the Malayan government during the Emergency in 1952: over a period of a few years one million of the rural population (mostly Chinese farmers) were moved from the jun-

gle fringes, where they were soft targets for Communist terrorist subversion, to properly planned New Villages. This not only afforded a reasonable degree of protection (Police, Home Guards, illuminated perimeters, etc.), but, more important, it enabled the civil authorities to introduce to these illiterate people a new way of life in the form of education, medical, and health services and improved agricultural methods. The people have often proved eager to learn. There were difficulties, of course, during the transitional period; but the viability of the concept has been proved and this program was the greatest single factor in the defeat, which took twelve years to accomplish, of the Communist-inspired insurrection.

Included in this mass resettlement were tribal groups (aborigines) living in deep jungle, whom the Communist terrorists were using as screens, sources of intelligence, and food suppliers. Their resettlement posed additional problems, and experience showed that if it was to be a success, very special care and unlimited patience were required. Initially, some small groups were airlifted out of deep jungle; but no one had given sufficient thought to the group's wishes, since the military requirement was considered to be paramount. In some cases this action proved to be a fatal mistake, and the groups were taken back. The lesson was learned, and from then on a technique was evolved whereby small military units with an interpreter were deployed in deep jungle for long periods with the sole task of winning over the aborigines to the point where they would come out voluntarily. The time involved varied from a few weeks to many months, depending on the degree of contact the group had previously had with the Communist terrorists.

It is relevant here to quote the views of the then Adviser to the Department of Aborigines on what he considered after long experience to be fundamental to the success of resettling tribal peoples:

- (a) Proper planning. Co-operation of the group concerned and their voluntary (not forced) agreement to the scheme.
- (b) Availability of suitable land voluntarily acceptable to the group; and assurance of Government approval to occupy the land.
- (c) Government assistance in the form of:
 - (i) Rationing until new cultivations are productive;

- (ii) Welfare goods (clothing, tobacco etc.);
 - (iii) Tools and implements necessary for house building and agriculture;
 - (iv) Medical attention;
 - (v) Proper administration and protection once they have moved;
 - (vi) Assistance to obtain employment if necessary;
 - (vii) Education for the children.
- (d) Unlimited patience; time for the community to adjust itself to its new circumstances and mode of life. Best achieved by arranging for an advance party from the group to move to the new area and prepare the way for the remainder. May take between six and twelve months to complete a move. If a change in agricultural methods is involved, it will take longer.

In concluding this section, it can be said categorically that a good *rapport* between government and tribal peoples can only be achieved through genuine mutual confidence, which may take many months, if not years, of patient effort to establish. Deep-seated prejudices must be overcome. Then and then only can a sense of belonging start to take root. If this sense is carefully fostered by all means available, it should lead ultimately to a closer identification with, and participation in, the life and economy of the nation.

GENERAL PLAN OF THE ACTION PROGRAM

Unlike other countries in Southeast Asia with similar tribal problems, there is no ministry, department, or division of the Laotian government specifically responsible for the administration of the hill tribes. This probably arises from the fact that the constitution accords Laotian citizenship to all permanent residents of Laos, regardless of race, who are not already citizens of another country; it also guarantees all citizens the same rights and privileges under the law, as well as the same type of administration. In practice, these constitutional provisions do not generally apply to the tribal peoples, who in many cases still retain their autonomy. One example of the way the system may operate should be illustrative. The official languages of the courts are Lao and French. Tribal languages are barred from the courts, although tribal interpreters are supposed to be admitted. The point at question here is somewhat irrelevant, since under the

military conditions which have prevailed in Laos for many years, the normal court procedures have often been suspended.

The main goal of the action program was to forge new and effective administrative links between government and the hill peoples both at central and provincial levels. At the central level it would be done by establishing, initially, the nucleus of a special department for the administration of the hill people; and at the provincial and district levels by closely involving the administrations in specific capital aid and welfare projects for the benefit and development of the tribes.

In addition to these relief and development programs for bringing government to the tribes, the intention is to introduce a radio program devised specifically for the tribal people of Laos and to broadcast in selected tribal languages. The precept here is that to achieve the ultimate goal of gradual assimilation of the tribal peoples into the national life and economy, the first and foremost essential is to be able to communicate with them. If this cannot be done initially through the medium of the national language (Lao) alone, then tribal languages must be utilized in addition.

PROGRESS OF THE ACTION PROGRAM

The concept of a special department for the administration of the tribal peoples in Laos has been generally accepted in principle, together with the policy aim that tribal people should be recruited to posts in the department when this step is found practical. At the present time, the staffing of such a department presents certain fundamental difficulties, the major ones being those of finance and personnel. Without the former, it is obviously not possible even to contemplate recruiting the latter. It would not answer the problem to second or borrow staff from other government departments on either a long-term or temporary basis. The secondment of staff was tried and proved a failure in the Thai government's Hill Tribe Development and Welfare Program, which *inter alia* calls for mobile extension teams. Secondment to the teams was unsatisfactory, and direct recruitment and training had to be used by the Hill Tribes Division of the Department of Public Welfare. Personnel seconded from one de-

partment to another feel, with good reason, that their promotion prospects within their home department suffer (out of sight, out of mind). In addition, there are the usual problems of working in the field in areas where communications are poor, such as long delays in the payment of already low salaries.

Ideally, a department administering hill tribes should be largely self-contained, certainly with respect to the everyday needs of the tribes in the fields of agriculture, medicine and health, basic education, welfare, etc. The department should be able to develop and implement its projects independently with the assistance and advice provided by tribal research. There are many reasons for this—the fundamental one is the absolute necessity for the right approach. The wrong one can do irreparable damage. The key executive staff of the department should not only be qualified in their respective fields, but, equally important, should have experience with hill people; and the extension workers who, after training, will often be operating without supervision in remote tribal areas, should be very carefully selected. A sense of dedication, understanding, and hard work is essential for the effective functioning of a department administering tribal peoples.

Within the limitations imposed by finance, the intention would be to establish the nucleus of this department in Laos with a balanced field team of specialists in agriculture (including livestock), medicine and health, community development, and welfare. Since such specialists are not presently available in the country, they would have to be recruited for a limited period from outside; then Laotian counterparts would understudy them in their field work. After acquiring field experience, the Laotians would need further training to fit them for administrative or semi-technical posts in the department. Once the process of establishing the nucleus was well under way, the creation of a cadre of extension workers and research facilities could be considered. Regarding the latter, the Laotian government might well profit from the Thai government's Tribal Research Centre in Chiangmai, where research and studies will cover at least some of the tribal groups common to both territories. Specific problems in which experience might be shared could include methods used to solve such problems as providing alternative cash crops to

replace opium, and the development of methods for training field staff. The Meo, Yao, Mussuh (Lahu), and Khmu² are the chief opium cultivators in Laos—all but the latter are large-scale opium producers in Thailand as well. Opium is the mainstay of their economy. As in Thailand, this is very much of a potential problem in Laos, and one of great complexity. Of the many tribal revolts against the French regime in Laos, at least one, that of the Meo in Sam Neua Province in 1918, was caused in part by attempts of the French to collect a tax in the form of opium.

The difficulties of lack of finance and expertise have been touched on, but it would be more than unrealistic to overlook or attempt to minimize the current problems arising from the confused internal political situation in Laos. This has tended to paralyze the administrative machine and deny to the government access to large areas populated by the tribes. A further aggravation is the woefully low salary scale of government employees. High wartime prices, coupled with fixed salaries, means that there is little inducement to hard work and integrity on the part of government workers, and government service no longer attracts the best candidates.

In the light of this somber picture one cannot help but reflect on the advisability of even attempting to create this new department at the present time with so many factors conspiring against its viability. This is not a policy of despair; it is an honest appraisal of the relevant facts, and it represents an equally genuine desire to ensure, as far as possible, that when government is properly introduced to the hill tribes in Laos, it has, at least, a reasonable chance of attaining its aims.

In the meantime, a modest start has been made to generate government interest in tribal matters at the provincial and district levels, by the launching of projects (schools, welfare, and wet-rice cultivation) exclusively benefiting certain tribal groups. Results so far are encouraging. A few radio sets have been distributed to selected tribal villages where Lao is understood, and undoubtedly much enjoyment is derived from the programs. There is an army transmitter at Luang Prabang, not a part of the national network, which broadcasts news in the Meo language for fifteen minutes every weekday, and Meo music for thirty minutes on Sundays. It is too early to evaluate this particu-

lar medium, pending the introduction of a special tribal radio program and a larger distribution of receiving sets.

CONCLUSIONS

(a) There are now indications that as a result of the ever present refugee problem in Laos (the majority of refugees being tribal) there is developing awareness in the government of its responsibilities toward the hill people.

(b) If this consciousness can be translated into impartial assistance in the right manner, a big step forward will have been taken in the relations between the government and the hill tribes.

(c) Whereas the importance of establishing a special department for administering the hill peoples is recognized, the continuing political instability and internal strife together with lack of finance, are cogent reasons against creating the department at the present time. The risks of it being stillborn are too great.

(d) Plans for establishing the department should proceed with the firm objective of implementation when circumstances are more propitious.

(e) In the meantime, efforts should be concentrated on developing communications with the hill peoples. Radio seems to be the most practical method. Of course, this development must be carefully synchronized, with increased programming coordinated with the distribution of more radio sets, since at present Radio Peking is already broadcasting extensively in some of the tribal languages.

(f) Where government services (e.g. medical, educational and administrative) exist in predominantly tribal areas, much more could be done to promote a better understanding with the hill people through the medium of these services.

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