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Piece for MacAlister

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piece for MacArthur

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By no reasonable measure is Laos an integrated country. Traditionally fragmented by historical divisions - now further aggravated by foreign involvement - the political situation appears confused and chaotic. Yet, behind the depressing prospects for an early unity on a national level, encouraging but overlooked trends have developed on a smaller scale. In several Provinces a new feeling of cooperation is evident. This cooperation, too amorphous and embryonic to be called integration, represents the local political cohesion that must precede the building of national unity.

Perhaps the most striking example of this new local cohesion, and potentially the most significant, has occurred in Xieng Khouang Province in north Laos.

Of particular interest here is

(the fact that Xieng Khouang and its principal geographic feature, the Plaine des Jarres, are beset by conditions normally most unfavorable to cohesion; e.g. an extremely mountainous and undeveloped terrain, a widely disparate population, and almost continuous fighting since 1954. But, despite these obstacles, the heterogeneous groups have begun to think of themselves as a people in the sense that they share a real or imagined commonality in their history.

culture, social organization and political experience with the outside world. In short, over the past 20 years, these people ————— > have slowly learned to work together to the point that they will fight together.

The ability of the Xieng Khouang races to cooperate in times of crisis is not altogether new. Several times in the last century unity has ^{developed} in the face of a threatening enemy. But in every case, calm brought disintegration. Now, once again, war - presently in its 15th year as a civil war and in its 9th as a part of the Vietnam war (meaning substantial foreign involvement) - has been the catalyst to cohesion. Whether or not it can endure peace this time is not at all certain. But fundamental changes in political attitudes among the people of the Province and in their orientation to the outside world suggests that it may. The reasons that underlie these changes is the subject of this paper. They are the elements of cohesion and they may be sufficiently general to be relevant to the problems of minority peoples elsewhere.

To begin with, the geographical and ethnic conditions of ~~the~~ Xieng Khouang are not as hostile to cohesion as they might first appear. Being the only large interior plateau south of Dien Bien Phu as well as being strategically equidistant from Vietnam and the Mekong valley, the Plaine des Jarres has historically been a focus for routes and a catch basin for people --

~~has been a place where people intermingle~~
~~has been a place where people intermingle~~ - from the pre-historic tribes who littered the plain with man-sized jars down to the Vietnamese battalions of the present day. In short, relative to the land that surrounds it, the Plaine des Jarres has been a place where people intermingle. Furthermore, the ethnic diversity of the people who came, while nevertheless extreme, was not as much an obstacle to cohesion as it first appeared. The reason for this is that most of the research and the knowledge accumulated by the West has been aimed at identifying differences between people rather than looking for the less obvious ties that keep groups together. Such an approach has led to the unfortunate result of putting tribes in isolated and unchanging environments. Often, of course, this view ^{was} / mirrored by the people themselves who had vested interests in perpetuating differences even if they were increasingly symbolic. For example, many lowland Lao found it advantageous to view the non-Lao as being so different from themselves that any real sharing of the political process would be a waste of time and effort. Similarly, many non-Lao have sought to enhance their importance by emphasizing their uniqueness. In such an atmosphere, the forces promoting cohesion are obscure even to the

participants themselves. It is not surprising, therefore, that many have overlooked the fact that a functioning system of interaction has existed in Xieng Khouang for some time.

As this inquiry is directed toward —→ examining that functioning system of cohesion rather than dissecting ethnic differences, the peoples of Xieng Khouang may be thought of as being oriented either toward the upland Lao or toward the highland minorities. And both groups have had to deal with the lowland Lao of the Mekong River valley. These terms establish the dominant cultural and social patterns of development. They have no relation to the major political divisions in the country for each has its share of pro and anti-Communists.

The upland Lao consist mostly of those Tai groups who did not follow the bulk of their fellow tribesmen into the Mekong valley, but who settled down on or near the Plaine des Jarres. Calling themselves Tai Phuan, they formed the core of the historic Kingdom of Xieng Khouang. Although defunct for two centuries, the identity of that Kingdom is kept alive through the inherited right of the descendants of the last King to the Provincial Governorship. Until very recently (1945) the ethnic identity of these people was further perpetuated through the name of the Province, Kwaeng Tai Phuan. It was changed to Xieng Khouang

in order to allay the fears among the lowland Lao that the people of Xieng Khouang were thinking of independence. The point to be established here is that long before Xieng Khouang became identified with the highland minorities - as is now the case - the upland Lao were at odds with the lowland Lao.

Related to the upland Lao of Xieng Khouang are the Tai tribes - principally the Black, Red, and White Tai. Although increasingly numerous in the Province, the majority of these people → remain further north - in Sam Neua Province and in North Vietnam. The reason for including them here is twofold; first is the fact that they share with the upland Lao a "poor country cousin" relationship vis à vis the lowland Lao, and second, they have played a pivotal role in linking the upland Lao of Xieng Khouang - who in many ways are indistinguishable from the lowland Lao - with the highland minorities.

The highland minorities are more heterogeneous. Paramount among them are the Meo of whom much recently has been written. ~~←~~ But while the Meo are the dominant group, they are by no means the only one... Larger in number are the Lao Theung or Kha peoples who have had considerable influence on the Meo despite their subservient status. ~~and have been~~ It is generally thought that the Lao Theung were the first of the migratory peoples to enter Laos. Since that time they repeatedly have had alien cultures and social systems forced upon

them while gradually being deplaced up into the mountains where they now co-exist with the Meo. As the recipients of much of what might be called the generalized culture of Laos, the Lao Theung frequently acted as cultural brokers between the Meo and the valley people. Despite a sort of love-hate relationship, the highland minorities have found common ground in their suspicions of the Lao and the knowledge that they had been lumped together and dismissed with equal disdain.

The third group, the lowland Lao, represents the society and culture that developed in the Mekong valley. Although sharp differences exist among the regional elites of the lowland Lao (Luang Prabang, Vientiane, Savannakhet etc.) they ^{have} traditionally been united in their condescending attitudes toward the upland Lao and indifference toward the highland minorities.

It is among these three groups that the critical changes in attitude have occurred and while the war accelerated the process, it did not initiate it. The first change took place within the highland minorities at a point when they accepted the fact that in some vague way they had more to gain from trying to move into the Lao system than to remain outside of it. However, this was no sudden breakthrough, no obvious turning point, but only the gradual

adaptation of tribal societies toward^a compatibility with the upland Lao. Then, as this trend became more clear, the upland Lao - notably the Governor of Xieng Khouang - took positive steps to include the minorities in the political process of the Province. Finally, as the two groups in Xieng Khouang coalesced, they have gradually convinced the lowland Lao that the Province is not only vital to the survival of the country but also that the people of Xieng Khouang are too powerful to ignore.

One may begin this examination of the elements of cohesion by looking at the common cultural heritage which in some cases has always been accepted while in others is being achieved through conscious manipulation of myth and history.

Both the lowland and upland Lao have long recognized their common ancestry in the Tai tribes who migrated into the region many centuries ago. Coedes has analysed the different life styles that subsequently evolved in the following way:

The difference that exists between social organization of the plains-dwellers and that of the peoples inhabiting the mountain areas has been explained as being due less to racial differences than to there having been a different pattern of development in areas remote from civilization....Thus the fertility of the soil combined with foreign cultural influences produced the civilizations of the Indochinese plains, and these offered a more and more marked contrast to the way of life of the mountain peoples.

It is these mountain peoples one would have to study in order to form some idea of what society in Indochina was like before contact was made with the higher civilizations... /the Tai/ type of social group has a hierarchial organization of the feudal variety, in which each district is a ritual unit governed by a hereditary lord or is in the position of a particular family. The family is patriarchal; name, office, and property being transmitted from father to son. Religion is an affair of the territorial group, not of the individual, and the ceremonies which inaugurate the main seasonal activities are carried out once and for all for the whole district by its lord. ¹

The most striking aspect of Coedes' remarks, however, is how closely his characterization of the Tai society corresponds to that of the highland minorities even though these groups are generally thought to have evolved separately with little contact between them. This indicates one of two things; either the upland Lao and highland minorities share in common an older, perhaps

1 Coedes (1967:32-33)

megalithic, ancestry, or alternatively that the two groups have been in contact with one another for a sufficient length of time for the minorities to adopt similar institutions. One indication that the latter might be ~~the~~ the case, may be found in the similarities existing in the respective myths of origin. For example, the standard Lao myth states that;

The three Khuns settled at (Dien Bien Phu) and with the help of their buffalo they began to lay out rice fields. But at the end of three years the buffalo died. From his nostrils there sprang a Creeping Plant that bore three Pumpkins. These fruit grew to be enormous. When they were ripe a loud noise was heard inside them. Pu Lan Xang took a piece of red-hot iron and pierced a hole in the Pumpkins: immediately crowds of men came pouring out. There were so many of them that the opening was too narrow to allow them through; seeing this the Khun seized a chisel and cut new openings for them. Such is the origin of the two races that people Laos: The Khas are those that came out through the holes made by the red-hot iron: the Tais are those who passed through the openings hacked out with the chisel. 2

~~(Bernal, 1959:379-380)~~

The myth of creation among the Meo is virtually the same and is obviously derived from the Lao story. The only change involves an addendum wherein the first man and woman produced a gourd instead of a baby, and were instructed

by a God to scatter the seeds of the gourd in the mud and throw the meat into the jungle. From the former grew the Tai and from the latter the hill tribes.

But the similarities between the two groups are not restricted to myths of impractical consequence, however interesting they may be. Indeed, there is a positive correlation in the forms of leadership. Among the Tai and Meo tribes, the local village or district leader is something of a semi-religious patriarch - a "father" who combines religious prestige with political status. According to at least one scholar, Quaritch Wales, this form of leadership is derived from a pre-historic megalithic culture which was general throughout the area and in which the chief was a delegate of both the deity of the earth as well as tribal ancestors. As such, the chief insured the maintenance of natural order and harmony through magical practices. If the rituals were properly carried out, the result was fertility of both man and nature. Whether this interpretation is correct may be debated, but out of a background such as this developed the belief that the chief owned all the land. What is most remarkable, however, is that this principle - often called the usufructary possession of land - is common among all three groups in Laos at the most meaningful political level. In other words, among the lowland Lao

the King owns all the land, among the upland Lao - or more specifically among the Tai - the district chief owns all the land, and among the Meo the village headman owns all the land. Although this point will be brought up again later in the discussion of the political system, the point should be made that because of this common element in leadership, the Meo of Xieng Khouang have been able to expand their concept of the village leader to include the district chief and the King of Laos with relative ease.

Supposedly irreconcilable differences in religion are frequently dragged into the argument that the groups in Laos are at either extreme of "civilization." The lowland Lao are often described as devout Buddhists whose indolence is rather the result of too much culture. The highland minorities, on the other hand, are frequently pictured in quite opposite terms; primitive, spirit-fearing animists etc. If in fact such a contrast was ever the case, which is doubtful, it certainly is no longer valid. Rather, there is reason to believe that the Buddhist religion never penetrated very deeply either into the interior of the country or into the society. In Coedes' words, Buddhism, along with other trappings of Indian civilization, lay like a "superstructure imposed on an indigenous substratum."³ Such a judgement is given further credence by the following comment by Thao Nhouy Abhay on the present state of Buddhism:

3 Coedes (1967:56)

...Temples have become the centers of endless discussions on childish details. Our monks, like the physicians of Moliere, believe that they can explain everything by quoting more or less correctly sentences in Pali or some references to which the common people have no access. All anxious and sophisms are considered good enough to come to the aid of their poor reasoning. And they go on repeating endlessly the same platitudes about the variety of life...In its essence, Buddhism is deeply tolerant, but sure has ~~lost too much of its authority...~~ 4

The reason for this weakness may be , as Sarkhisyanz suggests, that Buddhism cannot thrive in a weak state. But perhaps the reason is more directly related to Buddhism's incompatibility with Coedes' "indigenous substratum." One aspect of this local culture which stands out in particular is the highly undifferentiated manner by which religious status is connected with political power. And in such a system, the Buddhist doctrine is simply irrelevant. Thomas Kirsch has dealt with this problem in an unpublished paper, "Hill Tribes Religion and Society." In this paper Kirsch is trying to account for the structural variations in the political systems of hill tribes in Thailand. It seems that these systems are continuously changing between the poles of democracy and autocracy. In essence, ^{Kirsch's argument is that} political power can only follow the achievement of a religious "efficacy" or an "enhanced ritual status." The continuous competition for this status insures that

there can never be either a fully democratic condition wherein everyone has equal amounts of this political/religious status or a fully autocratic condition wherein one group or person monopolizes it all. Moreover, the competition for status guarantees that no group will remain long in any equilibrium. Kirsch concludes:

Although there is remarkable "structural variability" among these hill tribes, they can all be seen as sharing the same "generalized culture"; culture being defined as transmitted and created content and patterns of thought, ideas, and other symbolic-meaningful systems which shape human behavior. Viewed of one ethnographic group may then be seen as a "generalized culture," a playing out of the values and norms defined by the generalized culture. I would suggest that the application of the term "society" to any of these groups would be inappropriate since none of them was able to develop a single social structure. The ethnographic map of this region may then be seen as combinations and recombinations of elements of "customs," as these systems develop within the framework of the generalized cultural. 5
(Kirsch, pp. 75)

While Kirsch ^{was} ~~is~~ discussing the situation in Thailand, his thesis ^{is also applicable to Xiang Khong} ~~is also applicable to the situation in Laos~~ and provides helpful insights into ^{both} the nature of the indigenous culture shared by all the groups, as well as the often manipulative use of religion. Within the context of these remarks, ~~the willingness of many of the highland minorities to espouse~~

takes on a slightly different meaning. ^{6.}

Christianity, as reported by Barney among others, While genuine conversions based ~~on~~ on religious grounds undoubtedly have occurred, it ~~is~~ ^{must be added} that Christianity ^{most} has gained most of its converts among the disadvantaged groups of minorities - namely the Lao Theung and the Striped Meo (as opposed to the White Meo who hold all the political power). Given the close interconnection between religion, social identity and political leverage, it is not surprising that Touby Ly FOUNG, the titular head of the Meo, once remarked that, if he thought it important, he was perfectly ready to adopt the religious convictions of whoever he was dealing with. Moreover, Touby's willingness to have some of his children become Christian is another indication that for an important minority leader it is smart to cover all religious bets.

There is no conclusive evidence that behind the facades of the great religions there lies an indigenous animism common to all. But there are good indications that most of the people use religion in an undifferentiated manner that permits change and adaptation when it is politic to do so. Therefore, it is not remarkable that among the highland minorities the trappings of Buddhism are beginning to appear.

Like religion, diversity of language appears at first to be a divisive factor, but is in fact an element in the developing cohesion. The existence of separate languages in Xieng Khouang is a historical residue rather than a conscious attempt to maintain political autonomy. This is particularly true for the Meo as the majority of them have been in Laos less than ^{two} generations. Among the older generation, Vietnamese is a more common second language than Lao, but among the younger generation Laotian is as important as the knowledge of French used to be for the Lao. The fact that ^{Laotian} Lao is the only written language obviously places all others at a considerable disadvantage. As much as they may dislike it, virtually all the minority leaders realize that the knowledge of Lao is essential if they are to compete in the Lao system once military strength is no longer a factor. This explains to a considerable extent why all the attempts - mostly by missionaries - to introduce a writing system for the Meo language have never succeeded. It is also significant that the one Meo area that did develop a writing system and did spread it effectively through the population (incidentally using a Tai alphabet modified with Lao characters) was in North Vietnam due east of the Plaine des Jarres. Here the repressive political climate obviously made a pri-

vate language a useful thing to have. In Laos, on the other hand, the Meo have settled for a nice little story that both explains why they can not write their language and saves ^{honor} ~~face~~ at the same time. It seems that long ago in China there were eight tribes of whom the Meo were one. One day a God came to distribute written languages, but just before he arrived an enemy attacked. Being the bravest, the Meo went off to fight, but on returning victorious, found that the God had left taking with him their language. So the Meo have no choice but to learn Lao.

At the present time, even the lowland Lao seem to have accepted the fact that the continued use of minority languages is a practical necessity rather than a symbol of autonomy. This change in attitude is clearly evident in the complete reversal over the use of these languages on Government radio stations. In the early 1960's the Lao Government would not permit such programs. Five years later they did, for it was the only means of spreading the word to isolated groups. It is also interesting to note that refugees from North Vietnam ^{had to be} ~~were~~ used for the Meo broadcasts, ~~for~~ ^T they were the only ones who still spoke in uncorrupted Meo.

In summary, the cultural differences between the three groups appear to ^{be} superficial or at least considerably less important than they were in the past. Because

highland and valley peoples have always been in some form of competition and conflict, rituals and ceremonies affirming the differences between the groups are likely to continue long after they have ceased to be important in actual fact. And even now, despite the often conscious uniqueness of individual tribes, the real status symbol is a stripe or a star on a fatigue uniform -- status, in other words, within the Lao system.

The war in Xieng Khouang has eliminated hard differences between the social systems of the upland and highland peoples. Although the stereotype ideals may continue to exist as they do in cultural factors, the continued uprooting of several hundred thousand people over a period of 15 years has foreclosed any possibility of returning to traditional patterns of organization.

Epitomizing the social changes which have occurred is the breakdown of the kinship patterns among the highland minorities whose system has been most disrupted by the war. This system had at its core the closed, independent, self-sufficient village, and it produced a kinship pattern that was strongly patrilineal and organized into clans. These clans provided a man with a complete social identity. Among the Meo, the clans were ranked in a pecking order which reflected the allocation of political status and determined, among other things, who could marry whom.

Competition for status insured that the hierarchy was never stable. For example, no clan has been able to hold the top spot for more than a generation - before World War II it was the Lo, during the next 20 years it was the Ly under Touby Ly Foung, and now it is the Vang under Major General Vang Pao. In such a system, marriage had to be prescriptive - sort of a political/economic arrangement between clans. The aforementioned Vang Pao, for example, has carefully chosen his 5 wives from the most prominent ~~families~~ ^{families} and for all appearances this bit of bravado has been as successful politically as domestically.

The traditional clan structure defined a man's friends and his enemies. A Meo, for example, can still travel in relative safety almost anywhere in the country as long as he stays with members of his own clan. By the same token, the divisions within the Meo on the question of communism is split very neatly along clan lines. Virtually all of the Meo communists are from one clan, the Lo. How this came about is worth a slight digression. In the 1930's, the acknowledged leader of the Meo was a member of the Lo family. When this man died, his son, Faidaeng Lo, was in contention to succeed him and probably would have been elected to the position had not the French intervened. They preferred Touby Ly

Foung who was both better educated and more amenable. This intrusion naturally incensed the Lo and their followers, and subsequently they have sought support for their claim wherever they could find it - first among the Japanese and then among the communists.

In sharp contrast to the rigid structure of the highland minorities, the social organization of the lowland Lao appears flaccid and lax. Officially a bilineal form of kinship, in practice it has often become matrilineal with the woman providing the only stable ~~base and~~ continuity in the absence of a wandering husband. Significantly, it required an Act of the Assembly in 1943 to get the Lao to use family names.

The link between these two seemingly incompatible forms of organization can be found among the upland Lao and more specifically among the Tai. Gerald Hickey in his study of the Black Tai of North Vietnam offers a plausible hypothesis of what happens when a strongly patrilineal society comes into greater contact with the outside world. There, although the symbols of the clans are still maintained, the functioning system has begun to break down into a more bilateral system. This same process now appears to be happening in Xieng Khouang. The old prescriptive forms of marriage, for example, which were near the core of the patrilineal

system have given way to mutual consent which includes, as a last resort, a ritualized form of elopement. It is now accepted that should the runaway couple avoid capture for three days, the marriage stands regardless of parental wishes. Moreover, inter-tribal marriages, once completely forbidden, have become more common particularly between the upland Lao and the highland minorities.

These are but a few of the indications that the highland patrilineal system is disintegrating under the impact of war and the desire of the leaders to move closer to the center of power. As in cultural factors, symbolic vestiges of the old system will coexist with the new for some time to come and compound the difficulty of making meaningful distinctions.

In concluding this review of the cultural and social elements of cohesion, it would be helpful were evidence to be found suggesting that all the groups in north Laos were at some point in history closely related people. Were this the case, it would be a good deal easier to dismiss the present differences as being historical accidents. Unfortunately, nothing approaching a common point of origin seems to have existed and, indeed, so simple an explanation would be totally out of character for Laos. Instead, the best one can do at this point is to suggest that for the last two centuries or so, the upland and highland people have been in close contact with each other, subjected to the same ecological conditions and

molded by the same external forces. In such an environment, borrowing and adaptation between tribes almost certainly occurred. Few things in Laos are static or immutable, and the groups under consideration here are not among them.

This point may become more clear by looking at the agricultural methods used by the highland minorities and upland Lao. Convention characterizes the Meo and other highland tribes as practicing slash and burn (swidden) agriculture which requires a highly labor-intensive effort to clear jungle-covered mountainsides every few years for the cultivation of a low-yield dry-hill rice. In comparison, the upland and lowland Lao are described as paddy rice farmers who use the same field indefinitely and do most of the work with draft animals. Such an analysis concludes with at least the tacit assumption that this has always been so, and that even if given the opportunity, the Meo would not change. But the actual situation does not appear so simple.

To begin with, there is fairly widespread belief among the Meo - and Bernatzik has found the same to be true in Thailand - ⁸ that long ago before the migrations south, they used plows and animals to cultivate paddies. This knowledge was lost, so the story goes, during their diaspora in the Indochinese mountains. Whether this is actually true is not the point. Rather it indicates

8 Halpern(1964:35)

that a positive value is associated with one who can farm paddies as opposed to swidden.

More significantly, the Meo of Xieng Khouang practiced a considerable amount of paddy agriculture in the Plaine des Jarres region before the present war. They had established a stable social system sufficient to support paddy cultivation and sizeable cattle herds. Touby Ly Fount's family, for example, was reputed to have several thousand head of cattle and they were not alone in demonstrating their ability to handle lowland agriculture. When the war came and the Plaine des Jarres fell, all this was lost and the social organization collapsed. As they probably had done many times before, the Meo fell back into the mountains, sought refuge in small groups, and returned to swidden techniques which required no animals and less rigorous collective efforts. What is important ^{for the future} ~~here~~ is the fact that all the important leaders of the Meo at the present time came from those Meo ~~who~~ who were familiar with and had practiced valley agriculture.

Anthropologists use the term "dedifferentiation" to describe the process of groups turning inward upon themselves and becoming closed, self-reliant entities in the face of external threats. This seems to be an apt description of the Meo and other peoples coming off the Plaine des Jarres in the early 1960's. But such a pro-

cess has not been restricted only to the minorities for in 1888, a Frenchman observed that the Lao in the vicinity of Luang Prabang left their paddy fields and moved into the mountains to practice swidden agriculture when the area was threatened by invading Chinese. The sum of this is clear; the practice of swidden agriculture is as much a reflection of present political and social conditions as it is the immutable hold of history.

Although somewhat parenthetical, something should be said regarding opium and its impact on this discussion. Perhaps because it is exotic and mysterious, many observers give the impression that opium provided the basis for Meo prosperity and that it remains the hinge upon which everything swings. This is a gross oversimplification. Opium of course has been an important economic resource, but the real profits in the trade were not made by the growers - who by no means were only Meo - but by the middlemen -- the Chinese and the French. Indeed, for those Meo who lived on the Plaine des Jarres, cattle and more mundane crops were far more remunerative. The main effect of the opium trade in Xieng Khouang was that it forced the growers into forming something like producers organizations to protect their interests and thereby helped establish supra-village ties.

Different peoples do not suddenly accommodate one another politically. The process is slow and difficult; it has been no different in Xieng Khouang. Moreover, the search for common political ground has been made harder by the precipitous speed with which the Meo have moved into the country -- the best estimates place the minority population at three times its level in 1900.

Not unnaturally, the lowland and upland Lao reaction to this influx into what had been a Lao preserve has ranged from hostile indifference to active dislike. Neither was assimilation abetted by French policy which ^{above all} aimed at ~~above all~~ a stability achieved through keeping ethnic elements apart and at odds. Yet, mitigating this potentially explosive situation is the redeeming social characteristic shared by all the Lao -- they are not by nature a dominating or repressive people. Tolerance and time are much more in the Laotian way of doing things. But the early Meo migrants must have stretched tolerance to its limit. They were suspicious and hard, having come from Vietnam where contact with valley people usually were followed by often harsh Vietnamese measures to subjugate or control them. Having fled to Laos, the Meos ^{above all} wanted to be left alone, and this to the Lao looked more and more like the formation of an autonomous Meo state.

Given this inauspicious beginning, it is not at

all clear what made the minorities decide to opt "in" rather than "out" of the Lao political system. In most of the rest of the country, minorities (including the Meo) have found little in the Lao system that offers them much of a future. Consequently, they have either remained neutral or sided with the Communists.

So the question remains; why in Xieng Khouang? What special conditions pertain here that ultimately led to cohesion rather than division. Part of the answer has already been suggested, e.g. that the cultural, social and economic differences which at first appeared insurmountable, tended to work themselves out in practice. But along with these somewhat intangible factors, there had to be some practical political realities that gave the minorities a stake worth competing for. Before considering these political realities, however, it is necessary to sketch in how the traditional Lao political system was absorbed and accepted by the minorities.

As in previous instances, the first impression of the various political systems strikes one as being almost absurdly disparate. On the one hand there is the closed regional elite who still effectively controls the lowland Lao system with little or no competition from the nominally representational national assembly in Vientiane. On the other hand, there exists the stereotype primitive participatory democracy of the highland minorities. To a considerable extent both these examples represent "ideal" cases which become sharply modified in actual practice. Rather like the lines drawn on military situation maps of friendly and enemy areas, political models become all but indistinguishable on close inspection.

The roots of the lowland Lao system go back to the two centuries prior to the intervention by France at the end of the 19th century. The Period of the Warring States, as it is known in Lao history, was a time of endemic instability. The country consisted of many small Kingdoms ruled by regional elites who paid only nominal homage to the King. Katay D. Sasorith has described the relationship between sovereign and his princes:

When disturbances occurred to upset the capital and its King they did not necessarily affect the provinces and their Chao Mouangs. In spite of the violent competition that would every now and then arise around the throne, the princes and feudal lords who acted as Chao Mouangs did not explicitly take sides, but went quietly on governing their little states or fiefs and agreed in advance to put themselves under the rule of the victor....¹⁰ (Kingdom of Laos, pp. 88)

The French changed all that by the simple technique of expropriating the position of the King with the power to back the claim. But the "French Peace" lay on the Laotian indigenous political system rather like Buddhism lay on its religion. Equally unsuccessful has been the heir to French rule in Laos -- the western-style representational democracy. This political process is meaningless because it can produce no meaningful decisions, and from what is known, the communist Pathet Lao do not seem to be offering much of an alternative. For better or for worse, the involvement of international powers in Laos over the past 15 years has resulted principally in the perpetuation of the traditional forms of semi-feudal political power.

In a milieu such as this, the village democracies of the highland minorities could survive untainted only so long as the villages remained independent entities with no aspirations to higher political ties. But once the minorities decided to put villages together in order to compete in the Lao political process, the democratic system was bound to become more autocratic. This progression is particularly obvious in Xieng Khouang. While democratic elements remain, the highland system here more closely resembles the Lao -- on a smaller scale -- than it does the highland systems in other parts of Laos. In Xieng Khouang, highland villages are combined to form districts (tassaengs) and each district has a leader who enjoys virtually a semi-feudal →

on
claim ~~to~~ both the area and people. Political power along with religious status is usually inherited or achieved by "unanimous election". It is no wonder then why Faidaeng Lo was so upset when he did not receive the Chieftainship of the Meo following his father's death -- custom and tradition gave him every reason to believe that it was his by right.

Perhaps a clearer illustration of the evolution of the highland political system may be seen in the manner by which Vang Pao, the Meo resistance leader, put together and led, his military/political movement. From the very beginning, and in sharp contrast to more remote areas into which he subsequently moved, Vang Pao's resistance was organized into districts rather than villages. These districts - or military zones - represented nothing less than the extension of the upland Lao territorial organization into minority areas. Moreover, the Meo districts were commanded by leaders who almost invariably had achieved their position through inheritance rather than through a democratic process. Vang Pao, in seeking to wield these districts into a viable inter-dependent movement, was continually stifled by these frequently petty and narrow district leaders whose hate

of the Communists often only barely exceeded their dislike of tribal neighbors. Vang Pao's charismatic appeal and organizational ability, which ultimately would succeed in by-passing the uncooperative leaders to get at the people themselves, was initially largely restricted to cajoling the semi-feudal leaders into supporting him. Politically speaking, the Meo of Xieng Khouang had been acting like upland Lao for a considerable length of time. Like the Kings of the old Lao empire and like present day Prime Ministers, Vang Pao was constantly balancing a coalition of regional forces who retained for themselves considerable independence.

There remains, however, a spirit of individual independence among the highland minorities which is not visible among the Lao. But, more and more, this spirit is a residue of something past; a symbol and not a political alternative. It is something like our pleasant fiction that if everything goes wrong, we can always go West. Life is no longer that simple even in the hills of Laos. Warring groups cannot just split up in the way it once was possible. Military mobilization with its precepts of discipline and duty has eroded that undifferentiated edifice of the citizen-soldier who would fight a bit, farm a bit and move on when he pleased with his family tagging along behind. This image has been gradually replaced by the far less romantic, but perhaps more effective, full time soldier whose family is protected in

some rear area and who is willing to fight for another man's village.

One further point of proof that the highland minorities of Xieng Khouang have moved into the Lao system is the strong allegiance they have to the King of Laos. As mentioned earlier, there is nothing basically incompatible in the forms of leadership that would prevent the minorities from seeing the King as kind of a super village chief if they so chose. And this is precisely what has happened. That the minorities in other parts of Laos do not show a similar allegiance, is simply the reflection of the fact that they are still outside the Lao system.

The rather impressive demonstrations of ^{Xieng Khouang} loyalty to the King are at first puzzling. Certainly, they are not based on any tangible power possessed by the King. No one can claim that the King is much more than a figure-head and not a very awe inspiring one at that. But as a symbolic monarch, the Lao King has a sacred status which transcends the narrow confines of regional elites as well as minority villages. Amidst the crumbling institutions in Laos, the King serves as a link to a past greatness - particularly important to the Lao- and a direction for a future unity - particularly important for the minorities. In short, he provides something for everyone. Moreover, the fact that the King has little power in the positive sense of doing something, does not

mean that he is powerless. Indeed, the King's great strength lies in his ability to prevent other people from doing certain things. This may seem like an absurdly small point, but in the byzantine complexities of Lao politics which are ~~is~~ full of posture and gesture, this power to deny action is a considerable one and of great importance to the people of Xieng Khouang. Part of this power is reflected in fairly ~~fairly~~ obvious ways, e.g. the inviolability of the King's person. Violence of any kind is not condoned in his presence. Therefore it is not altogether surprising that Prince Souphannouvong, the communist leader who has never renounced his fealty to the King, threatened death to any of his men who ^{would} attacked Luang Prabang when the King was in residence. Similarly, the presence of the King in Vientiane has been sufficient reason for the abortion of several coup attempts. But the King's power also extends beyond himself to those for whom he has publically announced his protection. And, from its inception, the King has supported the Xieng Khouang resistance, going so far, in fact, as to call it the "savior of Laos". While it is impossible to judge ~~the~~ the actual extent of his influence, the position of the King has had a considerable impact on reinforcing the highland minorities' willingness to join the Lao system and on the lowland Lao's begrudging acceptance. This influence turned out to be

valuable in the early 1960's when a series of coups and counter-coups in Vientiane made Vang Pao and his supporters most unwilling to go to that city out of fear of being arrested. A serious impasse resulted, and the gap between Xieng Khouang and Vientiane widened to the point of becoming unbridgeable. Contact was maintained, however, through meetings in Luang Prabang for the presence of the King implicitly guaranteed safe conduct.

The demonstrated ability of the highland minorities to establish supra-village ties has been of critical importance in the development of political cohesion in Xieng Khouang. And this may not be just a recent development. Among the Meo, for example, there is a widespread belief that they were once a highly organized people with great chieftains and Kings. This point can conceivably be challenged - along with the claim that they were ^{ONCE} paddy rice farmers - as being only a manufactured myth to give them status vis a vis the lowland Lao. But it is historically incontestable that ^{whenever} ~~when~~ there was sufficient cause, and a charismatic leader, the Meo have proven themselves capable of highly effective unity. Two instances stand out in this regard. In the 1870's, the Ho people from China invaded North Laos and conquered the Plaine des Jarres. The upland Lao chief, Chao Hung, was killed but apparently the Lao and the Meo were successful in

regrouping in the mountains and waging a guerrilla campaign that ultimately drove the invaders out. As they would again almost a century later, the people of Xieng Khouang based their military organization on ~~the~~ feudal ^{clan} ~~family~~ divisions of territory. As a mark of their position, each zone leader was given an ornately decorated long sword - the 19th century equivalent of field commission. Although larger, the present resistance movement is almost a carbon copy of this earlier model. Then, in 1919, the Meo of Xieng Khouang revolted against the French. Although the uprising is usually described as having its source in a French imposed opium tax, at least part of the discontent was caused by failure of the French to pay the tribal conscripts who had been corveed into building Route 7 across the Plaine des Jarres to North Vietnam. To quell the revolt the French brought in Vietnamese troops whose undisciplined brutality permanently alienated the minorities and the upland Lao. Following an "exemplary" execution of several Meo leaders in Xieng Khouang, the Meo organized under a strong leader, Patchay, who claimed an invulnerability to bullets. With Xieng Khouang firmly in French/Vietnamese hands, the revolt took refuge in Sam Neua and bitter fighting ensued. The revolt ended precipitously when the French lured Patchay into peace talks and then turned him over to the Vietnamese who quickly disproved the invulnerability theory.

These early organizational efforts, however, along with the more recent anti-Japanese and anti-Vietminh campaigns, all shared an exclusive reliance on race as the mobilizing catalyst. There is little indication that they were fighting for anyone or anything but themselves. So lacking any ongoing reason for unity, ^{or any structure to hang it on,} peace almost invariably brought political disintegration. But even as these early generations were fighting essentially for autonomy, that autonomy had the curious effect of leading the minorities into the Lao system rather than out of it. In other words, when at the end of World War II the French granted the Meo a degree of local autonomy and a political organization parallel to that of the Lao, they actually provided the Meo with a valuable political freedom for which the Meo subsequently would fight to defend. One cannot fail but to draw a connection between the fact that the Meo of Xieng Khouang ^{were} ~~was~~ the only minority group granted the right to choose leaders above the level of the village and the fact that the Meo of Xieng Khouang are the most militant of the minorities on the anti-communist side.

In 1961, the Plaine des Jarres fell to a combined Neutralist-Communist force. Most of the lowland Lao soldiers manning the small Government garrison departed at some speed for the Mekong valley shortly after their commanding General had been taken "ill" and flown to

Vientiane. The Plaine des Jarres was simply not worth fighting for in the eyes of the lowland Lao. Their retreat, however, left several thousand Meo and Lao Theung civilians unprotected. At this point a Meo officer of the garrison, Colonel Vang Pao, soon to become General, chose to stay behind and by fighting a rear guard action, escorted the civilians to safety in the mountains. Around this nucleus, Vang Pao built the Xieng Khouang resistance which in the intervening 8 years has spread throughout much of north Laos and has enlisted the support of several hundred thousand people. Because of the somewhat exotic nature of the enterprise and the mystery that has surrounded it, certain misconceptions have arisen that give the whole endeavor a sui generis quality.

In fact it ^{really} isn't. Given the nature of the man and the situation, Vang Pao had little choice but to stay with his people when the Plaine des Jarres fell in 1961. This does not detract from his considerable leadership, but the highland minorities had made a commitment to the Plaine des Jarres area and to leave it would be to leave all that they had laboriously accomplished over the preceding half century. So from the very beginning, the Xieng Khouang resistance was aimed at conserving something worth fighting for. Then, as mentioned earlier, when the resistance began to take on some identifiable shape, it followed patterns of organization completely compatible

with those that the upland Lao had previously established in the Plaine des Jarres. In brief, the people of Xieng Khouang did essentially what they had always done in time of crisis regardless of what race they were.

Not unexpectedly, many of the lowland Lao viewed this with great foreboding. The spectre of an American supported minority movement hell-bent on creating an autonomous state gained quick currency. The press in particular seemed to enjoy tagging the operation as belonging to the Meo and contrasted the fierce, independent tribal warrior as being the very antithesis of the unaggressive and indolent Lao. In fact, however, the resistance was never restricted to the Meo although they did provide the initial core and backbone. Indeed, as the resistance grew, the proportion of Meo serving either as soldiers or as supporting civilians steadily decreased. At the present time, the best estimates are that the Meo constitute less than half in both categories although they are the largest single group -- the remainder being mainly Lao Theung, and upland Lao groups.

If there is a uniqueness to the current situation, it is in the ethnic diversity of the groups represented. For the first time the appeal to unity ultimately cut across every ethnic line. It is within this area, the delicate

business of political orientation, that marks Vang Pao apart from those that preceded him. In the beginning, he had very little choice but to use whatever he had to mobilize a dispirited people in a very short period of time. And the ~~the~~ best thing available was racial identity -- in fact it was probably the only thing that reached down into every village. But eventually, such a motivation would be self-defeating. Consequently, the top echelon of Meo leaders - if not the recalcitrant semi-feudal local leaders - became committed to forming a movement broad enough to appeal to all groups. Weening village leaders away from the false hope of a minority millenia required time and education, and no doubt it is still going on. Changes of this nature are not accomplished quickly for they entail no less than a change in the entire social and cultural system. That these changes have taken place - as outlined above - is one indication that large numbers of formerly uncommitted people are now attached to the Lao system. Sharp differences between the groups in Xieng Khouang remain and doubtless will continue, but perhaps what holds them together now outweighs, if only infinitesimally, what keeps them apart.

The validity of the hypothesis that a measurable amount of political cohesion has occurred is corroborated by the change in attitudes of the lowland Lao towards Xieng Khouang. In the space of relatively few years, .

where there once was suspicion, indifference and arrogance there is now at least a grudging respect. Critical for this transformation has been the role of the upland Lao -- particularly the members of the Provincial Government. During the early 1960's, the Governor and his staff seldom left Savannakhet where they had taken refuge both from the communists in Xieng Khouang and from the political uncertainties of Vientiane. Their return to the Plaine des Jarres area demonstrated to many Lao that their fears of minority autonomy had been ill-founded. Furthermore, the upland Lao provided an institutionalized channel between the emerging political forces in Xieng Khouang and the established patterns of the lowland Lao. Another factor in the transformation was that the lowland Lao really had no choice but to compete with the communists for the support of the people in the interior. This was where the war was being fought. The Xieng Khouang resistance had determined that and that fact alone made the traditional lowland Lao commitment to the Mekong valley insufficient and obsolete.

How the emerging political cohesion in north Laos will work itself out in the future is difficult to predict. Clear conclusions are not in the nature of things in Laos and this particular area will clearly be much affected by decisions and powers external to it. But there appear to be forces working in Xieng Khouang pushing towards a greater interdependence among its people and

towards a closer relationship with the Lao Government. And furthermore, these forces will probably be stronger than anything which an outside power might bring to bear. Should this hypothesis be correct, then American involvement in Laos -- which has not been consistent in its encouragement of political integration -- must be looked at in a slightly different and less self-adulatory light. In other words, it may well be that American policies in north Laos owe their partial success more to their compatibility to this trend of political cohesion than to any intrinsic brilliance of their own. Foreign powers, beginning with the Indians centuries ago, have come to Laos to conquer, meddle, influence and help, but they have all left that "indigenous substratum" pretty much intact. America might be wise to base its future presence on the probability that the ultimate effect of our involvement will be no different.

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