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The King: National Integration in Laos

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Introduction:

I should like to suggest that the King of Laos is perhaps the only means to national integration. Having said this, the question that immediately arises is what do I mean by national integration in Laos? I am not referring to strictly political integration--that is a long way off. I am referring to a vaguer idea, one that involves a national identity and the general acceptance of a symbol to stand for that identity. Among the various cultural institutions available, I am suggesting that the King is the only one which has the strength to become such a symbol. This conclusion is the result of two factors: historically the monarchy has been the embodiment of what is called the "Lao tradition"--even though the actual power of the King has been in decline for over 250 years. The second factor is that the concept of a King is the only shared cultural element among the highly diverse peoples who inhabit the country.

I cannot "prove" my thesis. I do not plan to try. But my argument should at least merit the idea that as a symbol of cultural identity and integration, the King of Laos is not dead. The ramifications of this hypothesis are vaguely undemocratic and almost un-American. Certainly they run counter to much of the political and social analysis that is currently available. They imply that the focus of American policy on a nominally representative government in Vientiane may have been overdone and very possibly seriously misdirected. In searching for something and someone with which to make

Laos a country, the United States may have been looking in the wrong place and at the wrong people.

I should state at the beginning that I have no unique definitions to offer. I speak of the Lao society. When I do so, I am referring to all of Laos as belonging to one society although I am aware that it is possible to subdivide the country into many smaller units that some may call societies. Without denying that serious social divisions exist, I think it more useful to speak of only one society. The search for national integration is to a degree, the search for one society. As a result of the social revolution that has accompanied the Southeast Asian War, Laos today is closer to being one society than it has ever been before. All the traditional social divisions and balances have been upset. It is only a slight oversimplification to say that the lowland Lao are faced with the choice of either voluntarily making room for the highland minorities within the Lao society or else this will be accomplished for them--or perhaps over them. I also speak of a cultural system. Here I am referring specifically to the cultural system of the lowland Lao. But, as I hope to demonstrate, this cultural system--or cultural paradigm--is not exclusively the property of the lowland Lao and is increasingly becoming less so. By a cultural system I mean the sources and the sum of all the factors that govern the way a people view their world. But the Lao cultural system is not static. It is undergoing extensive reform. Lao society has been disrupted and the old ways of looking at

the world are no longer valid. My belief--perhaps it is my bias--is that this reform will manifest itself in the increasing use of the King as a symbol of national identity. The King is an expressive symbol--he stands for something far larger than himself. In him is condensed all the hopes and ideals that, somehow, the Lao and minority alike would have their world become.

To support this hypothesis, I have considered three general areas: the derivation of Lao Kingship and how its historical development has differed from better known examples in neighboring countries; the means by which the general war has forced the King into altering the balance between being a constitutional and symbolic monarch; and the changes that the social revolution are likely to make in the future role of the King.

The overall bias of the paper should be stated if it is not already implicitly clear. I do not believe that Laos, a country with little meaningful contact with the West, can absorb solutions to social problems that are not wholly consonant with its historical and cultural past. A perverted medical metaphor may be permitted. The west has played the role of a not very responsible surgeon who has been on a transplant binge. A problem with national integration? Quick, give them a warm institution from a Western donor. It could work, but it may require such massive doses of political anti-biotics to prevent rejection that whatever natural immunity that did exist will be destroyed in the process. The transplant was a success, but alas, the nation is dead.

Historical Summary:

Early History:

At the present time, the odds in Laos seem to be stacked in favor of a not-so-idyllic national chaos. But this has not always been the case. Wistfully the Lao speak of former times when powerful Kings made Laos twice the size it is today. There is a "Lao tradition," and it is embodied in one dynastic family that has ruled for 600 years--from the legendary Fa Ngoun to the present incumbent, Savang Vatthana. The modern Lao elite under Western influence have tried to re-interpret this tradition. They have shifted the focus from the King to the "Lao people." But I believe that this has been more a tactic to gain Western support than it is a true reflection of how the Lao view their past.

The history of Laos is usually viewed from the perspective of the slow disintegration of the monarchy following a brilliant "golden age." But this "disintegration" can be looked at another way. It could be seen as the evolution of something uniquely Laotian.

The original sources of Lao Kingship came from the 13th century Khmer nation in Cambodia. Many of the Thai Royal Institutions originated in the same place. While the derivation of the Khmer Monarchy is currently under dispute, there seems to be some agreement that while India provided a substantial amount, at least part was the product of a local tradition--identified by Quaritch Wales as the "indigenous genius."

The fact that there was a local tradition--call it a "megalthic culture," an "indigenous genius," or something else--is vitally important for Laos. I believe it useful to think of the development of Kingship in Laos as being the gradual emergence, interaction, and synthesis of an indigenous culture with that of an Indian inspired model. Laos has also come under the influence of the Chinese principally through the forms of leadership developed by the Vietnamese. But I confess uncertainty to the nature and extent of its effect. Coedes (p. 49) states the point that while Indian influence came to Southeast Asia mainly as an invited guest, the Chinese tradition was usually forcibly imposed and therefore much easier to culturally reject. This seems particularly relevant in the case of Laos.

Lan Xang:

From the mid-14th century to the end of the 17th century, Laos flourished under the name of Lan Xang. It is seen today as having been the "golden age"--the age of heroes, great kings and glorious battles. Two figures emerge particularly worthy for praise and honor; Sam Sene Thai (1373-1416) who consolidated the realm, organized it, and maintained the peace; and Soulinga Vongsa (1637-1694) who was a King of power and strength, and who fixed the border with Vietnam on the sensible basis of whether people lived in houses on stilts or on the ground. Very little is known about how kingship really functioned in Laos at this time. Considerably

more information is available on Thailand and Cambodia and therefore it has been common to assume that the same conditions applied to Laos. This may be only partially correct. The model of kingship most often presented conforms generally with that outlined by Leach in "The 'Frontiers' of Burma." The King is a God-King, a Devaraja, who, through charismatic leadership, governs a small, turbulent realm. The actual control of the sovereign is limited to the rice fields immediately surrounding his capital city, although nominal control is claimed for a much larger area. Quaritch Wales has challenged the belief that the God-King concept came from India. Instead, he claims it to be more of a local development. Wales points out (p. 7), that in Thailand, the absence of a strong Brahmin class around the King and the weakness of contending political forces in the provinces eventually led to a strongly autocratic and centralized form of government-- along the lines of "sultanism" in Weber's discussion of patrimonial domination (Bendix p. 340). Later, under weaker Kings, the Thai God-King system broke down. The Royal officials who had once been a territorial based noble class now had no check on their rapacity. Being the temporary holders of "fiefs," they were encouraged to get everything while they could and so earned the label "kin mouang"--town eater.

I believe that the Lao Kings never achieved the degree of absolutism that is found in Thailand. However, this did not prevent Lao Kings from aspiring to divinity when their power

permitted. In 1666, Father Marini visited Vientiane and had the following comments on how King Souigna Vongsa ruled Lan Xang. (Kingdom of Laos, p. 64 et seq.)

8 ...The King is absolute and independent and he recognizes none as higher than himself, neither as regards civil affairs nor those of Religion. All land belongs to him as private property, and he disposes as absolute Overlord of all his subject's possessions. There is not a family in the Kingdom that has the right to inherit nor enjoy anything whatever that has been left them by will and testament. No mention is made of any sort of nobility; neither that which may be imparted by birth, nor that which may be acquired by wealth, nor of that either which may be acquired through the practice of virtues and fine generous actions. Public functions, employment, honours, wealth, all belong to the King, who raises to the highest office in the Kingdom those who best please him...."

Marini goes on to describe the position of the mandarins who were given land to control. Each mandarin rented his land for a period of three years with half the produce of the third year going to the King. Marini describes the organization of the government as emanating from a Viceroy who acted as an executive for the King. Beneath the Viceroy were eight minor Viceroys who controlled the eight provinces. Marini continues.

...Each of these Provinces has its Militias, consisting of infantry and cavalry, which are distinguished according to the Officers of war, and which are subject to the Viceroy, (the) Governor of the Province; and (these) Viceroys are subject to the first Viceroy, and he to the King. The troops are provided for by revenues that are assigned to them in every Province, so that the King has no other expense so far as they

are concerned; yet they are all obliged to serve him wherever the affairs of the Kingdom may call them without hope of any further advantage, always supposing they continue to be allowed the benefit of the funds and domains that are earmarked for their support....

Marini seems to confirm the notion that the King became increasingly identified as a deity as time passed;

...and so as to inspire in his subjects a high degree of respect and veneration for his person, he rarely appears in public and withdraws himself more and more from their sight as time passes, preferring that his people adore him as a hidden God than be recognized as being a man like themselves and of the same species.

But this powerful, personal rule did not persist.

Souligna Vongsa apparently overextended himself in the rash abduction of a princess from Xieng Khouang--a tributary Kingdom strategically situated in the high ground between Vietnam and the Mekong valley. As it would do again some 250 years later, Xieng Khouang became the fulcrum in a power struggle between the Vietnamese and the Lao. By concluding an alliance with the Annamese, Xieng Khouang's defection from Lan Xang initiated what is referred to as the Period of the Warring States.

The division of Lan Xang into the smaller states of Vientiane, Luang Prabang, Chanpassak, and Xieng Khouang is usually considered a sad degeneration from greatness. Yet the centralized power of Souligna Vongsa appears not to have been a very efficient and practical way to rule the elongated Kingdom. Carved out of the underpopulated territory which

surrounded the early Southeast Asian Kingdoms, Lan Xang became powerful at the expense of an internally divided Thailand and a weakened Khmer empire. In a sense, Lan Xang borrowed greatness along with land. With them came the ideal of the absolute God-King. It was a pleasing aberation, but an aberation nonetheless.

The Warring States:

Historians mark the period of the Warring States from the beginning of the 18th to the end of the 19th century when the French intervened. It was a period of internal rivalry between the four principal states broken by external wars with Thailand, Burma, and Vietnam. Each of the Warring States came under foreign influences that still persist; Luang Prabang with China and Burma, Xieng Khouang and Vientiane (both desisted in 1828 following a war with Siam) with Vietnam; and Champassak with Thailand and Cambodia.

The institution of the King as it was practiced under the rulers of Lan Xang ceased to exist. In its place emerged a form of rule based on a confederation of principalities and not on the charisma of the King. I hesitate to use the term feudal because of its overuse, but it seems that Laos did become a feudal aggregation based on territorial allegiance. Even under Souligna Vongsa this form of organization had been just beneath the surface as indicated by Father Marini's account of the Provincial organization. Even in its most

autocratic periods, the effective rule in Laos was a less than arbitrary system of territorial control through a hierarchial structure of command and authority. Katay D. Sasorith elaborates this point; (Kingdom of Laos, p. 34)

When disturbances occurred to upset the capital and its King they did not necessarily affect the Provinces and their Chao Moungs. In spite of the violent competition that would every now and then arise around the throne, theprinces and feudal lords who acted as Chao Moungs 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....(p. 30)

What I am suggesting is that Lao Kingship was very similar to the patriarchial feudalism that existed in Thailand before the 15th century--before it became a centralized form of government based on personal ties. The Lao King was less a monarch and more a patriarch--a tribal leader whose realm was governed by men who often were not relatives. Power in Laos developed more out of territorial and regional attachments than out of the "client"-type relationship familiar in 16th and 17th century Thailand where the vassel at least theoretically could change his loyalty should his superior not fulfill his part of the contract. The Thai peasant enjoyed a freedom to move away if he so chose. This was not the case in Laos. As their history has revealed, the small Kingdoms strung out along the Mekong River never attained sufficient centralized power to discard a system of loosely

confederated, semi-autonomous territories.

The arrival of tribal elements in northern Laos around the middle of the 19th century had a problematical but undeniable affect on the character of Lao Kingship. Many scholars--Leach among them--have set up a dichotomy between lowland and highland peoples. Differences certainly exist, but I wonder if the models have not been overdrawn. Contact and presumably some interaction between the lowland and highland peoples have been going on far back into pre-historical times. Long enough certainly for many cultural institutions to become shared. What I am proposing is that the form of Kingship and social organization of the Tai tribes in the area of Dien Bien Phu was not only very similar to that which existed among the Warring States in the Mekong River valley, but also not unknown to the highland peoples that began to fill up Laos in the last century--principally the Meo and the Yao tribes. I realize that this is a highly speculative hypothesis and at the present time unsupported by historical fact. I propose nonetheless that it is more accurate to think of the form of Lao Kingship as the evolvement of a uniquely Southeast Asian institution rather than the gradual degeneration of the Indian inspiration.

Coedes (p. 32), who normally is one to dismiss with all possible haste any overdrawn theories about the existence of an indigenous Southeast Asian culture, makes the comment that one should look to the mountain valleys and the Tai tribes if one is looking for a glimpse of how the lowland Thai and Lao

people governed themselves before the advent of the Indian influence. According to Coedes, Hickey and others, the Tai tribes are distinguishable from other mountain groups by the following characteristics; feudal land ownership based on a hierarchy of noble families, patriarchal political organization of territory, religious belief based on the group as opposed to the individual, and a custom of ritualistic ceremonies marking seasonal activities. Perhaps I am incorrect but such a description also appears to be a very accurate picture of the Lao in the period of the Warring States--long after the Indians had come and gone.

It is difficult to unravel the relationships between political power and religious status among the tribal peoples. It is the complexity of this interrelationship and the undifferentiated character of the indigenous culture which I believe to be at the base of the Lao concept of Kingship. This is a murky subject and one that I would gladly leave aside were it not intrinsic to the problem of integration. It is senseless to talk of political integration in a country where political power is integral with what Dr. Kirsch calls "religious efficacy, ritual status and potency." (Kirsch, p. 5)

Quaritch Wales in his controversial book, "The Mountain of God," posits the idea that a pre-historic "megalithic culture" was held in common throughout a wide portion of Southeast Asia. Armed with such a potent concept, one feels able to

smite all the historical and cultural problems with one fell magical blow. Parallels, for example, immediately leap to mind between the odd coincidence of present belief and historical fact. Among the Black Tai, and other tribes, a man is conceived as having thirty-two souls. The presence of all the souls are required for continued good health. But, Heine-Gelderen (p. 4) tells us that in ancient Burma, where man and state were microcosms of the universe, the state was organized to reflect the thirty-three Gods of Mr. Meru. It was thought propitious to have the capital city surrounded by thirty-two provinces. Was a man thought to be similarly conceived? Is there a connection between the builders of Old Prome and the tribes of the Sip Song Chao Tai?

What appears to be the significant factor in Wales' argument is the correlation between his ideas on megalithic culture and the form of animistic belief that pervades northern Laos and Vietnam today. The essence of the megalithic or indigenous culture theory is the combination of an ancestor cult with a cult deifying a God of the Earth. The position of the tribal chief was one of acting as an intermediary between the tribe and its first ancestors, as well as insuring through magic, feast, and ritual that the God of the Earth would maintain a proper balance between man and nature. The fertility of man and soil was the product of this balance. Archaimbault's article in the Journal of Siam Society of April 1964 shows how these two features of a megalithic

culture have survived. Hindu religion stressed fertility rituals but had no ancestor worship. It is not surprising therefore to find in Southern Laos which was most strongly influenced by the Hinduized Khmer, that fertility rites and sacrifices abound. The Lao New Year celebration in the south until very recently, was principally marked by sacrifices of water buffalo and by a one-day lifting on the ban of sexual intercourse between Lao and the tribal groups who were considered to be the original owners of the land before the Lao came. In the north, however, Archaimbault notes that the Lao cosmogony is more similar to the tribal Tai's. Ancestor worship is more important and the rituals involving the Lao and their tribal predecessors during the New Year celebrations vary from those in the south. Here the King symbolically representing the first ancestor, wrests the land away from the tribal people. I am not going to champion the megalithic culture theory. I only wish to point out that there may well have been a shared cultural heritage between the peoples of Laos who are politically fragmented at the moment.

In conclusion, the two centuries commonly called the Period of the Warring States saw not only a return to a more traditional form of territorially based Kingship, but also the introduction of non-Lao tribal peoples who shared with the Lao some very basic religious-political concepts. The nature of these concepts and how they functioned is far from being clear, but they apparently provided enough common ground so that on at least one occasion, the Luang Prabang Kings could

mobilize these tribes in defense of the royal capital when it was threatened by Chinese bandits in 1884. It is this basic, hardly articulated acceptance of the King by virtually every tribe and people of all ancestries, which makes the King the only over-arching symbol that currently exists.

The French Period:

The fifty years of French rule (1885-1945) imposed a moratorium on the struggle between the Thais and Vietnamese for what remained of the Lao states. The French put Laos on ice for half a century. But, like an interrupted conversation, the struggle resumed in the 1950's when Laos became "independent."

There were no rebellions during the French rule--only a few insignificant uprisings by the minorities. The "French Peace" is usually attributed to the genius of the French administrators who did not disturb the local patterns of government. The Kingdom of Luang Prabang was even left nominally independent. But the French did destroy the last vestiges of the "absolute" King and left nothing in its place. They struck at the heart of the old monarchical system by interposing themselves between the King and the Provinces. In 1894, the French chose their own King, Zakarine, because they thought him more sympathetic to French rule. With the French running things in Vientiane, the King in Luang Prabang passed into a peaceful vacuum of anachronistic custom.

Even the traditional oath of allegiance to the King by the provincial governors in the Sisaket Temple in Luang Prabang was replaced by an oath of loyalty to the French Resident Supérieur. (HRAF, p. 49)

The French did all they could to reduce Laos to the most manageable entity for the few officials they could afford to station there. They imposed peace at the expense of demeaning what gave unity to the country. As peace, Buddhism and an enervating climate are said to have sapped the militaristic spirit of the Thais during most of the Ayudhya Period so the same might be said of the Lao during the French occupation in Laos. (Wales p. 7)

Post-World War II:

By the end of World War II, the Lao King was a powerless figurehead. In 1941, the French had all but bought off King Sisavang Vong by arranging for the union of the defunct Kingdom of Vientiane and Xieng Khouang with Luang Prabang under Sisavang Vong's rule. The royal family of Xieng Khouang was promised the position of hereditary governor for their cooperation, while the pretender to the Vientiane throne, Prince Phetsarath, was given the long vacant post of Second King, or Viceroy--called the Maha Dupahat. In that brief period at the end of the War after the Japanese had left and before the French returned, the aging and senile King attempted to reassert his control over the Lao Government but was rudely disabused of the idea. Prince Phetsarath had royal ambitions of his own. As head of the only military force

present, the Lao Issara, Phetsarath gave the King an ultimatum to either accept the limits of a constitutional monarch or nothing. Sisavang accepted. He was enthroned with full honors on April 23, 1946 as the constitutional monarch of a free and independent nation. Unfortunately, the next day the French retook Vientiane and the King did a royal about-face. By August a "modus vivendi" had been signed with the French under which the hereditary ruler of Champassak, Prince Boun Oum, agreed to accept the suzerainty of Luang Prabang in return for the perpetual position of Inspector General of the Realm. Although he came out of the year as the titular ruler of a reunified country, the political manipulations of 1945 and 1946 had all but destroyed the King as even a symbolic ruler.

During the 1950's, the position of the King and the entire institution of the monarchy fell to an abismal level. In 1959, at the cremation of his father, the present King, Savang Vatthana, was heard to remark, "Alas, I am doomed to be the last King of Laos." (Dommen, p. 287) His concern was understandable. Caught in the inexorable squeeze of international power, the King appeared doomed to a rapid extinction. Far being a symbol of unity, he was damned as the epitome of a system of traditional rule that had brought nothing but division and war. It is not difficult to see how this opinion evolved. The post-war political turmoil can and has been viewed as nothing more than the continuation of

warring royal families under the guise of modern political labels. Beneath the ineffectual King in Luang Prabang, the regional royal families had matched personal ambition with modern ideology. Boun Oum, the Prince of Champassak, had championed the cause of Thailand and the conservative West. The royal family of Vientiane, first under Prince Phetsarath and then under Prince Souphannouvong, the communist leader, and Prince Souvanna Phouma, the neutralist Prime Minister, seemed bent on at least a reconciliation to the interests of Vietnam. It is not my purpose to detail the political events of the last 20 years. I only wish to establish the fact that the King and the competing royal families have been at the focus of post-war political developments. Whether by bad luck or by bad judgment, the entire institution of the monarchy has become identified with the issues that divide rather than integrate the country.

The United States and the Lao King:

In the form of a long footnote, passing mention should be made of the lack of sensitivity which the United States has shown towards the King and what he represents. It is not a question of having insulted the King, it is rather one of having continued the French policy of politely ignoring him. At some point in the early 1950's, the United States seems to have decided that the King could serve no useful purpose and might best be left to vegetate in Luang Prabang. That our policy towards Laos has frequently been short-

sighted, manipulative, and mismanaged has been well documented by Dommen and others. But our attitude towards the King might merit an extra comment or two. From the beginning, we have totally ignored the potential role that the King might play in unifying and integrating the country. By failing to support any genuinely nationalistic movement in Laos and by trying to create an anti-communist bastion, the United States has effectively denied the King any meaningful role. Where the King has stood for political integration, we have contributed to the polarization of the country. Where the King has stood as a link between the people and the elite, we have created a larger gap by the mismanagement of our aid programs. To some extent these failings have been corrected. But there remains to be seen an American policy wherein the King can play a constructive part.

Effect of Social Disintegration on the Cultural System:

Implicit in this paper is the concept that the institution of Kingship has played a significant role in forming the attitudes and beliefs with which the Lao people view their world. To perhaps a lesser extent this is also true of the non-Lao minorities. I have tried to distinguish between the Indian inspired forms of charismatic Kingship and the indigenous tradition in which the King is more of a patriarch governing semi-independent territories through an organiza-

tion of officials. Because of the undifferentiated nature of Lao society, one cannot say that this model of Kingship is either wholly political or wholly religious. It is a combination of both. It is Kingship as a cultural system. In essence it embodies the political-religious qualities which Prince Damrong of Thailand ascribed to his own country; the ideals of toleration, assimilation, and national independence. (Wales, p. 249) Unlike Thailand, however, Laos has been less fortunate. In the light of current events these ideals, seem more the result of physical weakness than they are the product of a moral strength. But perhaps this very ambiguity may be why they are still useful as ideals. The King, by symbolizing these ideals in his person, has been able to transform an ignominious situation into qualities which give people a measure of pride and identity. It is ironic that the one man who everyone thought would be irrelevant to the political future of the country, has been the only one to successfully articulate a meaningful course of action in the face of war.

The failure of Buddhism to provide any cultural stability is, quite frankly, a mystery to me. I confess that I know only the rudimentary facts about the functioning of the Buddhist religion in Laos. This may explain some of my confusion. But others seem as confused as I. It does appear that Buddhism has been in a decline for sometime. In the middle fifties, Thao Nhouy Abhay wrote a stinging denuncia-

tion of the Buddhists. (Kingdom of Laos, p. 253) Aside from accusing the Buddhist monks of laziness, dabbling in politics, and lack of religious discipline, Abhay likened the monks to the physicians of Moliere who tried to explain away the ills of the world through the elaborated recitations of meaningless formulas in languages that they did not understand. Halpern, Sarkisyanz and others have made the suggestion that Buddhism requires a dynamic and powerful state in order to be effective. If this view is correct, one need look no further for the reasons explaining Buddhism's lack of performance. Another possibility might be that the Buddhist Sanghs was organized regionally along lines parallel to the Provincial organization. As such it could not perform any meaningful role in a national sense. Whatever the reason, Buddhism has failed to mobilize the Lao population and has been rejected by the non-Lao highland minorities.

Political ideologies have failed almost as completely as religion in providing the Lao people with any meaningful cultural system. Neither communism nor its conservative imitations have been able to mobilize the population to any degree. It may well be that a strictly political ideology will never be successful if it remains strictly political. Part of the problem rests on the fact that all the current ideologies have become the tools of the traditional regional elites. Whatever message the ideologies originally had, it is quite clear that they have it no longer. Ideologies have become either totally irrelevant to the needs of the people

as in the case of the conservatives, or they have become suspiciously identified with a foreign power as in the case of the communists. To an increasing extent, national integration has become a question of making the non-Lao highland people feel that they have a place within the Lao society. As long as the political structures are firmly in the hands of the traditional elites, it is unlikely that they will initiate any serious programs to broaden the political base in order to include people who they feel that they cannot fully control. To most lowland Lao, the ideals of political assimilation and toleration apply only to them. When they have offered watered-down versions of these ideals to the non-Lao minorities in the past, they have hedged the offer with conditions so onerous that few non-Lao have responded.

The King as a Symbol of National Integration:

In the preceding section I indicated that a strictly religious or political approach to the problem of national integration would fail because of the undifferentiated nature of Lao society. In the place of either extreme, I suggested that the King is the only institution which can span the gap between religious conviction and political action. At this point, it is appropriate to look more closely at this super-wonder institution.

The first impression is not encouraging. Savang Vathana ambles about with measured pace, lethargic in speech and gesture. Ponderously, he moves through crisis and calm. Though well

educated in France, the King has yet to reveal himself as a dynamic, charismatic, or progressive leader. He is no Sihanouk, nor even a Bhoumiphon. But if my conception of historical Lao Kingship is correct, perhaps it is neither necessary nor desirable that he become more like his neighbor monarchs. Joel Halpern speaks for many Americans in dismissing the King along with Buddhism, as being a dying institution. (p. 56) Furthermore, he believes that the communist avowals of loyalty to the throne and church have been merely tactical moves which they have no intention of following should they come to power. (pp. 58, 93) As the final stroke to his argument, Mr. Halpern quotes an American public opinion poll--bringing to mind an almost ludicrous image of Mr. Gallup hunkering down to a rice bowl in a Lao village. The poll showed that about one third of the people knew the King's name. This theoretically proved how impotent a force the King really was. But I tend to interpret it precisely the reverse. First of all, no one ever refers to the King by name for that is a common taboo. He is usually called Chao Si Vit--Lord of Life. I even think it is encouraging, after almost a century of increasing ceremonial isolation, that as many as a third of the people know the King's name. Even such a critic as Mr. Halpern is forced to admit that there is no better known figure in the country. I have no intention of inflating the King to a position of a father-figure for all the people. He still has a relatively

limited geographical and demographic appeal. But what is remarkable is that after years of being politely ignored and reduced to responsibilities such as occasional motor circumambulations around Luang Prabang in his blue Chrysler, that the King is still around and still a force within the country.

Before looking at the symbolic role of the King, it might be useful to briefly outline the constitutional powers which he possesses. The Constitution written in 1947, gives the King somewhat more latitude than that of the normal constitutional monarch. The most important of his powers are; to appoint and dismiss the Prime Minister, to dissolve the National Assembly under certain conditions, to confer military and civilian rank, to promulgate legislation and treaties, and to act as the titular head of the armed forces. The King's functions are not inconsiderable, but neither do they give him any actual power to change a given course of political action. He is involved but not responsible.

If the King of Laos can be said to have power, it is in his symbolic position to embody the ideals and stand for the essence of all that is Lao. In the rare times that the King has spoken, he has attempted to establish a position, independent of foreign powers, which all Lao can accept.

The physical "sacred and inviolable" character of the King's person is proclaimed by the Constitution. But it is more than a paper guarantee. It extends beyond his person to include things and people within his patronage. The mere

presence of the King or the Crown Prince has a most calming effect upon the endemic political in fighting that thrives in Vientiane. On at least one occasion, a plan to overthrow the government was dropped because the King was visiting the administrative capital. This kind of effect has led many Lao to believe that the political instability will cease only when the King takes over full control of the government.

Inviolability also extends to the entire city of Luang Prabang. This clearly derives from the traditional belief that the capital--in this case the royal capital--was the magic center of the universe. There is a story--perhaps apochryphal--that when the communist forces were within striking distance of Luang Prabang in 1953, Prince Souphanouvong threatened immediate death to anyone who attacked the royal city while the King was still in residence. Less dramatic but perhaps more meaningful, has been the acceptance of Luang Prabang as the one place in Laos where leaders can meet--regardless of ethnic or political background--and be assured that nothing untoward will befall them.

I do not think that I need emphasize again that it is the religious efficacy of the institution of Kingship that gives Savang Vathana much of his symbolic power. Furthermore, I confess that I do not know enough about the rituals of Kingship to speak knowledgeably on the subject. There is no Lao equivalent to Wales' Siamese State Ceremonies. The King is the "High Protector" of the Buddhist state religion,

but one gets the distinct impression from accounts of the New Year celebrations that many of the ceremonies and rituals are animistic in origin. Insofar as these beliefs are shared by all the people of Laos, the role of the King as the symbolic purveyor of fertility is of enormous importance.

The remaining source of the King's symbolic power is his position among the non-Lao minorities. This is the most important point and one where Halpern and others have been completely wrong. Far from being an empty institution forced upon them from above, I believe that the minorities see the King--and to a lesser extent the lower royalty--as being their only friends in the Mekong River valley. Part of the reason, as I have tried to point out, is that the institution of the King fits in very closely to an ancient pattern of social organization common to virtually all the tribes. In saying this, I do not wish to get involved, as did Hocart, over whether the idea of common forms of kingship is a result of historical divergence or convergence. The other factor contributing to the King's symbolic power among the minorities is that allegiance to the King is a far less volatile channel to integration than any direct assault on the political bastions of power elite. Loyalty to King is like Motherhood--no one can afford to knock it.

The Future Role of the King:

If until now I have teetered perilously close to conjecture, in what follows I completely lose balance. There are so many things that could happen that any prediction is all but guaranteed to be proven wrong. I make several assumptions. First, the internal situation will remain confused and violent. International pressures to keep Laos a buffer state will prevent the complete domination by any one side. Second, the physical institution of the King will remain roughly as it is--i.e. his powers and position. There are other qualifications that might be made, but perhaps those above are sufficient.

As the internal political forces have become increasingly polarized around the international extremes, the position of the King will become more prominent as the institution that provides the only link between them. In order to give a semblance of strength to this stance, the Lao will turn to their myths and history for appropriate parallels. The name of the country may well be changed back to its original name, Lan Xang. The French-given name of Laos has no historical meaning. The hero-kings of the past may well be resurrected and dusted off to give the Savang Vathana's quixotic armour some additional polish. The former Kings, Sam Sene Thai and Souligna Vongsa, would be suitable models for a revitalistic movement to shore up the position of the King. Conceivably, the King might initiate an irrendentist claim to the former

Lao territories in northeast Thailand. In short, I believe that the King--or those around the King--will attempt to portray the monarchy as the one institution that has not sold out or been taken over by foreign powers.

Internally, I would think that the King will resist any efforts to be drawn closer to the political intrigues of Vientiane. The chances of a Laotian Sihanouk are slight. However, to reestablish the traditional hierarchical pattern, the King may resurrect the title of Viceroy, or Second King, who historically took care of the administration and the fighting. In fact, the current relationship with Souvanna Phouma is almost that. Furthermore, as the Viceroy was usually a member of the royal family of Vientiane, Souvanna would be the logical choice for the title. In connection with this reassertion of royal position, the balance between Vientiane and Luang Prabang will shift in favor of the latter. Long dormant ceremonies of allegiance may be reinstated and increased importance given to the annual oath-drinking rituals. To counter any criticism about a return to absolutism, the concept of an "elected" King may be revived. This custom is common today among various tribes and apparently was practiced by the Lao before the advent of Indian influence.

The Constitution grandly proclaims that, "all the people regardless of race are Lao citizens." But to the non-Lao minorities, it is clear that most Lao hardly consider them as human beings much less citizens. As earlier indicated, the survival of Laos as a country will rest in large part

whether these people can find a place within the Lao society. In attempting to accomplish this, the Lao King may make his most significant contribution. In the early 1960's the King began to visit the highland areas for the first time. Most important of these visits has been his annual appearance at the Meo New Year ceremonies in Xieng Khouang Province. Upwards of fifteen to twenty thousand people attend these ceremonies and the evident emotion on both sides indicates that it is more than an empty ritual. To people who have felt that they have no status within the Lao system, the visit of the King is interpreted as a sign that the future might be better. Rather dramatic proof of this faith is that the powerful anti-communist minority guerrilla forces that have been developed in Xieng Khouang often claim that they are fighting for the King rather than for the Vientiane government. I believe it all but certain that the King will try to strengthen these ties to the non-Lao people. Increased visits, education, and the creation of a minority institute in Luang Prabang under the aegis of the King might be logical expectations. In conclusion, one might hope that out of a society fragmented by tradition and war, the Lao King will succeed in providing the over-arching ethos to keep it all together until other institutions can be developed.

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