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Geographic, Demographic, and Ethnic Background of Laos

Joel Halpern, *University of Massachusetts - Amherst*



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AND ETHNIC BACKGROUND

ON

LAOS

[These papers are issued in a preliminary version for the scholarly community in the hope that they may elicit comments which may be incorporated in a subsequent revised version.]

JOEL M. HALPERN

Dept. of Anthropology

Brandeis University

Waltham, Mass.



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GEOGRAPHIC, DEMOGRAPHIC AND ETHNIC BACKGROUND ON LAOS

Geographic Setting

Land-locked in the center of Indochina is the Kingdom of Laos, hemmed in on the north by China, on the east by Vietnam, on the south by Cambodia, and on the west by Thailand and Burma.

In an area of approximately 91,000 square miles, or somewhat smaller than the state of Oregon or the British Isles, there dwell, according to the most optimistic estimates, only about thirty-three persons per square mile. In the most heavily populated area of Laos, the Mekong River plains along the Thai border, the population density may reach up to 180 per square mile. This figure is almost half that of the average for the whole of India or for a Thai village near Bangkok, as Tables 4 and 5 indicate. Compared to these areas, most of the Laos countryside is relatively empty. The topography of Laos provides a partial explanation, since most of the country is mountainous, particularly in the northern part.

The Annamite mountain chain forming the eastern frontier with Vietnam plays an important role in conditioning the climate of the country. There are two distinct seasons, a wet period from May through October, and a dry one from November through April.¹ About two-thirds of the 100-150 rainy days in a year occur in the rainy season. The amount of precipitation outside the wet season is only about twenty percent of the total annual rainfall. (Table 2). The rice crops in both the paddy fields and the upland clearings are, of course, dependent on this rainfall pattern.

Luang Prabang Province, along with most of northern Laos, is one of the drier areas of the country, receiving annually approximately 1000-2000 mm. (40-80 inches) of rainfall, while the Bolovens Plateau area in southern Laos has well over 150 inches of rainfall in its central portions. Recent years have been relatively dry, resulting in considerable difficulties for rice cultivation. During the height of the rainy season damage may be done to crops and overland transportation is rendered hazardous if not impossible. River transportation is improved due to the rise in the rivers (Table 3), and air travel is affected adversely to varying degrees.

Relative humidity is high, often reaching ninety percent even when it is not raining. During the wet season winds are predominantly from the southwest and during the dry season from the northeast. In late April, prior to the onset of the rains, temperatures reach the maximum for the year. Of course, they vary significantly with altitude and to a lesser degree with latitude.

Once the rains begin temperatures drop slightly, although the driest months of the year, January and February, are also the coolest. (Table 1). These winter months are frequently chilly in northern Laos, presenting a problem to all but the more prosperous inhabitants, many of whom lack adequate clothing and shiver around fires in the early morning and evening. There is a considerable incidence of pneumonia during this season.

From November to March the plains and valleys are foggy until late morning. In the area around the royal capital, a small basin surrounded by mountains, fogs frequently cannot land until the haze burns off around noon. Some observers have linked an all-day haze from March through May to the burning of forest clearings which occur at this time. Although the fires are clearly visible and give off a fair amount of smoke, most geographers doubt that it is sufficient to have any real meteorological effects.

According to one recent writer Laos has a population density of 19 per square mile (7.3 per square kilometer), with eight percent of the land cultivated.² Comparing these facts with historical sources we find

that Reinach estimated the population density at 4.7 per square mile (1.8 per square kilometer) and stated that twelve percent of the land surface was cultivated with the possibility that one-third could be cultivated in the future. He felt that potentially the country could support a population density of 26-30 inhabitants per square mile (10-12 per square kilometer).³ Table 1 indicates that currently the population density of Laos ranges from 15 to 33 per square mile (6-13 per square kilometer) depending on the source used. Taking even the most modest present estimate of the population of Laos a minimum tripling of the population relative to the total land area in a little less than the past half century is indicated.

Another way of viewing population concentration is to compare the population density relative to the amount of arable land. Table 2 shows that Laos has the lowest density for any of the countries in Asia considered. The densely populated Mekong area is still less than the average for the Asian tropics. Thus despite the three-fold increase Laos still remains one of the most sparsely settled countries in Asia. Although Reinach's prediction appears to have been overfulfilled it is still hard to visualize Laos as being crowded from any point of view.

Demography

Commenting on the demography of Laos is a complicated undertaking in view of the fact that few of the available statistics are completely reliable. No complete official census has ever been undertaken.⁴ Those figures that do exist have been collected largely by untrained local officials. These form the basis of the statistics collected by the French colonial administration, and many French sources specifically emphasize their limited reliability.⁵

At the time when Laos was a French colony one of the chief uses for these figures was for tax rolls. Obviously such figures should be interpreted with extreme caution, but this does not mean that they are completely useless provided a certain internal consistency exists and the figures follow logical trend. As a further check, in certain cases, it is also possible to compare data from Laos with analogous areas in neighboring Thailand and other countries in Southeast Asia.

A principal motivation for undertaking the present study is that since Laos is one of the least known countries in the world it is hoped that bringing together in one place various bits of information from scattered sources may at least provide a point of departure for future studies of the population.

The basic place to begin is with an examination of the total population of Laos in historical perspective. Fortunately there exists a study by Pietrantoni which does an excellent job of summarizing all of the information available until 1943. According to Pietrantoni, the only figures for the population of Laos prior to the establishment of the French Protectorate is the census of King Oun Huan, son of the famous Fa Ngoum, traditional founder of the Kingdom of Lan Xang. It was undertaken in 1376, and recorded 300,000 Lao-Thai males between 18 and 60 years of age and 400,000 non-Thai. From this a population total of 3 million inhabitants can be derived, but it is of limited utility for comparison with figures of our era because we do not know the precise boundaries of the kingdom at that time. These figures are also obviously very approximate, and there is doubtless a wide margin of error. But from what is known of the relatively complex political organization existing at that time, it seems reasonable to assume that a population of approximately this order of magnitude existed in the general area now occupied by the Kingdom of Laos.⁶

In 1900 the publication *Notice Sur le Laos Francais*, published in Hanoi, gives a population of 470,000 for an area of 267,000 square kilometers, which is probably equivalent to 400,000 for the 225,000 square kilometer area of Laos in 1912, the date of the first official figures. A guide of 1910 gives the population at 548,000. These figures are summarized in Table 9.

Comparing the growth of the Laos population from 1917-1957 and with the rest of the world for 1920-1956 (Tables 10 and 11) we see that although the figures for Laos are high they are by no means unmatched by those of other areas; the close correspondence between Laos and Cambodia in Table 11A is particularly striking, although this cannot be cited as proof of the accuracy of the Laos figures. In any case, from what we know of population dynamics in predominantly agricultural and tropical countries analogous to Laos, it seems logical to suppose that the population grew at an increasing rate under French control. There are several reasons for making this assumption. First, even if the birth rate remained constant during the more than half century of French rule, it was a period of relative peace and Laos was free of the debilitating wars with Thailand and her other neighbors, which had taken such a toll of the population, particularly during the early 19th century when the Thai decimated Vientiane and removed a large portion of the population of that area to the other bank of the Mekong.

In addition the French established a health service. Even assuming that it was not too effective on the local village level, particularly among the scattered mountain peoples, still hospitals and clinics were established in the major towns, and large numbers of rural patients were treated and inoculation campaigns begun, doubtless affecting the death rate, especially in those relatively densely populated plains surrounding the major towns. The large scale malarial spraying campaign currently being conducted by the government of Laos should also have a significant effect on population increase, since malaria appears to be a major cause of death. Similar developments have been documented for other areas since World War II where DDT spraying dramatically decreased the death rate from malaria.

Table 7 gives the provincial breakdown for the periods available. It can be seen that the various provinces have increased rather unequally. For example, Nam Tha has grown by a factor of less than 4, while Saravane has increased over 10-fold. This may reflect a change in provincial boundaries, as is obviously the case with Luang Prabang, or the fact that the more easily accessible (to the government official) and larger Lao villages constitute a greater proportion of the population in one province than in another. It would be risky, however, to attempt to read too much into these figures.

The problems of using Lao statistical materials are well illustrated in Table 8 which provides a breakdown of the population by provinces and districts in the post-war period. Even excluding the three northern provinces for which insufficient information is available only half the provinces listed seem to show a pattern of inconsistent increase. For example, in Saravane some Muong figures are higher in 1956 than in 1960; such a development is possible but does not appear likely. In the case of Attopeu certain districts are identical for varying years while others show a third increase. The situation is summed up in Table 8A where figures for seven selected villages for 1955 and 1958 are compared. In certain cases predictable increase has occurred while in others there are random increases or decreases most likely reflecting the individual temperaments and abilities of village chiefs and the extent to which they wished or were able to comply with government requests for population estimates.

In Table 6 some significant relationships can be established. There is a noticeable variation between the hilly northern provinces and the central and southern ones, the latter having considerable (for Laos)

rice-bearing plains bordering on the Mekong. The former have for the most part less than 6 persons per square kilometer, while in the latter we get figures as high as 10 and 12 in 1958. Pietrantonio documents this distinction in great detail. In Muong Thakhek, Khammouane Province, he finds a density of 21 per square kilometer, 14 in Muong Pakse, Champassac Province, as contrasted with 2.6 for the whole of Nam Tha or 2.4 for Phong Saly.⁷ It should be noted that even these highest figures fall short of the 69 (180 per square mile) cited for certain areas of the Mekong plain in Table 4. Although the population density appears to have increased about 50 percent in the past 15 years, the relative distribution by provinces appears to have remained approximately the same.

Tables 14 and 15 clearly show that this population distribution by provinces which has been maintained historically is also closely correlated with village size. Thus the most densely populated provinces also have the largest villages. These differences are particularly striking in comparing Vientiane, Attapeu and Xieng Khouang: in the case of Xieng Khouang 83 percent of the population is concentrated in villages of less than 200 inhabitants, while in Vientiane only 42 percent of the population is found there. In Xieng Khouang only 10 villages are listed as having a population of over 300 or less than 1 percent of the total compared to over 13 percent for Vientiane. Vientiane, Savannakhet and Champassac all have average village populations of over 200, and they are also the three most densely populated provinces with densities of over 8.5 persons per square kilometer. Similarly, Khammouane, Nam Tha, Phong Saly, Sam Neua and Luang Prabang all have a population density of less than 6 and an average village size of less than 130 persons. (Table 22).

If we look at the ethnic composition of the first group of provinces, we see that all are at least 80 percent Lao-Tai, while in the second group only Khammouane has a majority of Lao-Tai in its population (Phong Saly and Sam Neua have practically no Lao villages, although they do have some Tai. See Table 31 for an ethnic breakdown of Phong Saly Province, and Table 27 for data on Sam Neua).

Ethnic Background

Two salient geographic facts -- the sparse, scattered population and the mountainous terrain -- are most forcibly impressed on the traveler making a plane trip north from the administrative capital of Vientiane to the royal capital at Luang Prabang. Circling over Vientiane one sees the town stretched out along the Mekong, surrounded by rice fields with occasional small patches of forest. Leaving the Mekong plain the land abruptly changes to rugged mountains cut by narrow valleys. Looking closely at the settlement pattern below, the observer will see what almost amounts to a textbook illustration of ethnic stratification and economic-geographic adaptation to the land based on varying degrees of altitude. The major ethnic groups inhabiting the mountains and valleys of Laos and their customary altitudes of habitation are summarized in Tables 16 and 20.⁸

Lao officials divide the inhabitants of the country into four groups: Lao-Lam, or valley Lao; Lao-Tai or tribal Tai⁹; Lao-Theng or Lao of the mountain sides (instead of the derogatory term Kha); and Lao-Soung, or Lao of the mountain tops (Meo and Yao). Implicit here is an attempt to emphasize the unity of the country. These terms, however, are largely political and the important cultural differences remain.¹⁰

Although the Lao and tribal Tai belong to the same general language group and share a common origin in China there are important differences. Some scholars have claimed that the tribal Tai are representatives of an earlier form of social organization out of which the Thai (of Thailand) and Lao evolved. The tribal Tai of whom perhaps the most important group in Lao are the Black Tai are patrilineal, with a belief revolving around ancestral dieties, and there are also hereditary elite families in the villages.

At one time they were organized into petty kingdoms. The last of these collapsed after the Second World War. By contrast the Lao and their associated sub-groups are bilateral in their social structure, Buddhist, and without hereditary class groups within the village. Unfortunately there is insufficient information available for us to draw a rigid distinction between Thai-Lao and tribal-Tai. For example, the Tai Lu in the area of Muong Sing bear many resemblances to the neighboring Tai Dam but unlike the latter are Buddhists (although they have not been so for very long).

The Lao-Theng or Kha is the general name applied to the very diverse group of indigenous inhabitants who lack both a writing system and formalized political organizations beyond the village. Those few who are Buddhists have adopted the faith of the Lao relatively recently, a few have become Christians, but the majority are animists. In contrast to both the Lao and tribal Tai whose economy is based largely on irrigated rice, the Kha cultivate slash-and-burn fields.

The Miao and Yao, although culturally distinct groups, share in common a number of important cultural traits. Like the Kha they are slash-and-burn agriculturists in most cases, but their distinction lies in the fact that they dwell high in the mountains and raise opium as a cash crop. Both Miao and Yao have strong patriarchal influences in family and village organization and share a common origin in China, from which they migrated relatively recently. Literacy in Chinese is also fairly widespread among these groups. Their religion has certain strong Confucianist and animistic influences. Their dress is a further distinguishing feature. (Table 21A).

Migrations and Distribution

In general the Lao live along the rivers and in the valleys, and the Tai live in higher valleys. The Miao and Yao inhabit the mountains from about 600 to 1,800 meters while Lao-Theng groups are irregularly distributed in between on mountain slopes.¹¹ Reconstructing the patterns of migrations the Khmu and other proto-Indochinese groups appear to have originally been widely distributed in both the mountains and plains. About eight centuries ago the valley dwelling, wet rice cultivating Lao-Thai appeared in Laos, migrating south in response to the expanding pressures of the Han Chinese.¹² Later (largely during the past few centuries), the Miao and the Yao tribes moved in from Yunnan and Tonkin engaging in shifting cultivation. The current ethnic stratification, then, does not have very great historical depth.

In the northern part of Laos the Tai and Lao¹³ are distributed along the Mekong and its tributaries. In the eastern part of Indochina the Tai are found in the vicinity of the Tonkin plain and thence inland, while the Tai Dam and Tai Kao live in the highlands and to the south are found the Tai Deng.¹⁴

The Tai Dam and Tai Kao are located to the north and east of Sam Neua in the former 4th Military Territory of Indochina. Generally speaking the Tai Kao inhabit the north of this territory and are not an important ethnic group in Laos while the Tai Dam are found in the southern part particularly in the area of Dien Bien Phu located only a few miles from Phong Saly.¹⁵

The Tai Neua or northern Tai inhabit the Mekong valley from Vang Vieng to Sam Neua and part of that of the Salween. In 1918 they were estimated to number 600,000.¹⁶ Up to recent times there are said to have existed 28 Tai Neua districts some of which are felt to overlap with the Tai Lu of Sip Song Pan Na.

The Tai Lu, called by the Chinese Pa-vi or Shui Pa-vi,¹⁷ inhabit the twelve Pan Na ("countries" according to Seidenfaden and not 12,000 raddy fields), eleven of which are situated on the West bank of the Mekong. The twelfth is Muong Sing in Laos. Outside the Sip Song Pan Na there are many Tai Lu groups in places such as Chieng Tung in Burma, in North Thailand at Chieng Rai and Lamphun and in Laos in the Nam Ou valley near Luang Prabang. The Lu of Lamphun are the descendants of prisoners of war taken 150 years ago when a Thai army invaded Chieng Tung in Yunnan. There are also a few hundred Lu in northern Tonkin. In 1918 they were estimated to have numbered over 350,000 in the Chinese owned Pan Na, with 50,000 in Chieng Tung and including those in Thailand and Laos they may at present easily number over 750,000, or almost equal to the number of Lao in Laos.

The Khmu are located mainly in the western part of northern Laos, up to the Nam Leng, a tributary of the Nam Ou which joins the Mekong a few miles north of Luang Prabang. The Khmu of the Nam Leng mark the northern limit of the Khmu on Lao territory with the exception of those in the area of Muong Sing.¹⁸ They are particularly numerous in the mountainous areas between Vientiane, Luang Prabang and Xieng Khouang.

The Meo are distributed sporadically in northern Laos from Yunnan south to Phou Khao Quai¹⁹ but are concentrated mainly in Xieng Khouang. The Yao are found in relatively large numbers in the northern part of the Tonkin plain and in the mountains to the west, and in Laos they are located chiefly in southwestern Sam Neua, around Nam Tha town, northwestern Phong Saly and to a lesser extent in the Luang Prabang and Vang Vieng areas, as well as in northern Thailand. Their distribution is irregular and their villages are scattered.²⁰

The Lao are thought to constitute about fifty percent of the total population of Laos (see Tables 22 and 23). In any case, they are the dominant group politically, economically and socially. Their religious, linguistic and other cultural affiliations are with the Lao of Northeast Thailand. A handbook on Thailand published by the Thai government on the occasion of the Ninth Pacific Congress in 1957 makes the following statement about the Lao:

"The Lao differ but little from the Thai, and are in reality as much Thai as are the Thai. The Lao do not call themselves Lao but Thai.²¹ The Lao of Thailand are divided into two divisions: the Lao of northern Thailand or Lao Phung Dam, and the Lao of eastern Thailand, or Lao Phung Khao. (Black-bellied and White-bellied Lao)."

The terms refer to the fact that the men of the former are closely tattooed from waistline to mid-thighs; this tattooing is absent in the latter.²²

"The Northern Lao inhabit the whole of Northern Thailand...In addition to the name Lao Phung Dam they are frequently called by their neighbors Lao Yuen or Thai Yuen. The Eastern Lao occupy a great part of the Khorat Plateau and the valley of the Mae Khong [Mekong]. There are also scattered communities of both these Lao divisions in Lower Thailand..."

"The Eastern Lao can be divided into two language groups: the Lao Wienchau [Vientiane] and the Lao Kao... most of the population of the three provinces of Frachin, Krabin and Nakhon Nayok are Lao Wiengchan, all originally prisoners of war deported to these districts just one hundred years ago...²³

"The dialectic difference between Lao Wiengchan and Lao Kao is not great, but quite distinct to an observant ear."²⁴

Thus it becomes quite clear that the distinctions between the neighboring peoples of Laos and Thailand are largely political. This is true of the tribal groups as well as the Lao. (Table 64). Movements due to warfare are significant (there have been similar types of movements within Laos), although economic conditions can also be persuasive. But in both cases the movement is almost always southward. This applies to all major ethnic groups.²⁵

Klausner (1959) observes with regard to the Northeast Thai-Lao that villages migrated as units after first sending some responsible citizens to scout out the possibilities. The Lao village in terms of its agricultural economy is also not too stable a unit, at least when the matter is viewed in terms of fifty years or more (Table 18A); the tribal villages are even less so, since they move every few decades. It can be truly said that almost none of the rural villages in Laos are really permanent. The few villages in the Vientiane area that have existed for several centuries are rare exceptions. Some change every few dozen years, although generally speaking the Lao and Black Tai²⁶ tend to be more permanent than the Miao or Hmu because of the former's dependence on irrigated rice culture.²⁷ This mobility of the population has been a major obstacle confronting potential map-makers and census takers as well as government planners.

Ethnic Composition

It is certainly clear that a most important fact concerning Laos is the ethnic composition of her population. In recent years it has become quite common when discussing the problems of Laos to assert that the lowland Lao who control the government are not even a clear majority in their own country, and that at least half of the people belong to tribal groups. Unfortunately, it is not possible on the basis of currently available information to furnish any detailed documentation on this point, but the figures given in Tables 22-32 illustrate something of the complexities involved. Table 22 is incomplete since it omits the provinces of Sam Neua and Phong Saly, which at the time of compilation were under Communist control.

One of the major complications is that the Lao and Tai are listed together and not broken down into separate categories as they were in the statistics issued during the period of French rule (see Tables 23-32). The political motivation for this is obvious since it places the Lao in a more favorable position. Yet on a personal basis the Lao sharply distinguish themselves from the Tai groups, although without question they consider themselves to be more closely related to the Tai peoples than to the Lao-Theng or Miao-Yao groups. As we have indicated, there are important differences between the Lao and various Tai groups in customs, religion and family structure, although some of the latter are Buddhists. The various Tai groups also had their own political hierarchies which were not integrated with those of the Lao. In fact, for the most part their origin lies in North Vietnam, and without question some of the Tai peoples now residing in Laos feel themselves strongly drawn in that direction.²⁸ This feeling is intensified by the fact that although some Tai do occupy government positions, they feel themselves to be discriminated against. It is also interesting that the inhabitants of the Tai Dam refugee villages in the area of the towns of Vientiane and Luang Prabang appear to have integrated themselves into Laotian society after the pattern of the Vietnamese rather than the Lao. For example, they have become craftsmen, vegetable gardeners, petty traders and domestic servants, occupations approximating those of the resident Vietnamese. These particular groups are for the most part not Buddhist and share certain ritual observances with the Vietnamese.

Even assuming the Lao-Tai to be a homogeneous group, we can see in Table 22 that they are in a clear majority in only 6 of the 10 provinces of Laos listed. Examining Table 23 we are able to check these figures comparatively and at the same time achieve some historical perspective. As has been repeatedly emphasized, all Lao statistics should be treated with some caution, yet they do show a significant degree of internal consistency. Thus the proportions of the total population in each of the major ethnic groupings has remained relatively unchanged in the period 1911-1942. In 1911 the Lao were 45 percent of the total population and in 1942 they were 44 percent; the Kha were 32 and 30 percent and the Tai were 19 and 17 percent for the respective years. Only the Meo-Yao seem to have more than doubled from 2 to 5 percent over the forty year interval (Table 23). In this latter case there is a very plausible explanation -- many groups may have migrated south into Laos from neighboring China and North Vietnam over this period, following earlier trends. In fact, based on the questioning of contemporary groups there appears to have been a migratory trend from the bordering provinces of the north into Luang Prabang, and subsequently into Sayaboury and Vientiane.

It is possible to see some deliberate attempt at manipulation here, but this would seem to be inconsistent with the idea of haphazardly collected statistics. Certainly on the local level, the village or district officials would have had to preserve some records in order to know what they were manipulating, and judging from the situation existing today there does not appear to be much support for this view. On the national level, the French administrators would have had to engage in keeping two sets of books. Although there are many things of which the French as a colonial power may have been guilty, this does not appear to be one of them. Their failing appears to be more on the side of laxness in keeping statistics and emphasis on the European and métis population for which, in contrast to the other inhabitants of Laos, detailed records exist. Yet, since tax assessments were based on these records, there was considerable motivation for some sort of accuracy.

Trying to assess the validity of the proportions expressed for 1942-1955 presents a number of difficulties. There can be noted interestingly enough, a spectacular jump in the Lao-Tai category from 61 to 74 percent and a decrease in the Kha figure, with the Meo-Yao statistics remaining more or less constant. This reflects the absence of Phong Saly and Sam Neua from the 1955 calculations. Fortunately there are detailed statistics available for Sam Neua for 1936 (Table 27), which indicates a Tai population of approximately 68 percent, rather close to the Lao-Tai average for all of Laos of 74 percent for 1955 (based on the maximum population estimate), so that we may roughly assume that the omission of this one province would not have made a great difference in the overall average, if the percentage composition of the population had not greatly altered in the intervening nineteen years. But in this case it must be remembered that the "Lao-Tai" are actually tribal Tai; there are virtually no Lao in the province. This leaves Phong Saly, whose population was estimated at about 50,000 in 1955, or approximately 4 percent of the total population of Laos. (Table 31).²⁹ We must therefore look elsewhere for an explanation of the increase in the Lao-Tai component of the population of Laos.

Table 24 gives us some help, but we must be cautious in assessing the figures since the Tai column includes proto-Indochinese groups such as the Souei, which in provinces such as Saravane constitute over 12 percent of the population. The Lao category, even though it is augmented by the Tai-Lu, provides valuable help. Let us try to see specifically those areas in which the ethnic valley-Lao total significantly more than half the total population and constitute a definite majority. In Table 23 we see that in 1942 in the Kingdom of Luang Prabang, which included much of northern Laos (principally Luang Prabang and Nam Tha Provinces) they constituted only 35 percent of the population. In a survey conducted by the French authorities in 1950 in Sayaboury Province, the Lao composed only 25 percent of the population in Hong Sa district and 40 percent in Pak Lay (Table 30).

Together these two districts constitute the majority of the province accounting for 229 and 166 villages respectively out of a 1954 total of 523, or about 75 percent, while the 1960 census figures give 76 percent for Lao-Tai groups in the province. These sets of figures would incline us to treat with some reserve the Lao-Tai percentages given for these provinces in Table 22. Table 25 provides an extensive sample of the population of Xieng Khouang. The Meo figures are almost identical to those in Table 22 and one is inclined to doubt that they are complete for the larger population given in this table, since the population of the major towns appears to be excluded from Table 25. Turning to Table 32 we see that in Nam Tha province the Lao are not significant. In Huong Sing district they constitute only the officials and their families, while the Tai (principally Lu) are 37 percent of the population. In Nam Tha and Houei Sai districts the Lao are 2 and 6 percent respectively, while the Tai are 44 and 40 percent. In Sam Neua we have already seen that no Lao are listed, while the Tai form approximately 68 percent of the population (Table 27). In Saravane (Table 28) the Lao are 43 percent of the population, while Table 24 lists only 30 percent of the population as Lao-Tai in Attapeu (see also Table 29). This leaves the Provinces of Khammouane, Vientiane³⁰, Champassac, and to a lesser extent Savannakhet as predominantly Lao. It is only in Vientiane Province that the non-Lao-Tai peoples constitute a negligible minority.

It is not without significance that with the exception of the Province of Khammouane, all of the provinces bordering on the Democratic Republic of Vietnam and People's Republic of China contain only a minority of Lao. This fact has made guerrilla and probing tactics such as occurred during the summer of 1959 much easier for the DRV since the same tribal groups are found on both sides of the border. In the civil war in 1960-1961 the question of Vietnamese infiltration has not been successfully answered (tribal or non-tribal), nor of Siamese Thai for the Royal Government.

Another important factor is underestimation of the population. The villages of the tribal peoples are much smaller and more scattered over mountainous terrain than the larger settlements of the Lao located in the valleys. Table 22 indicates that Vientiane is 99 percent Lao-Tai, while Xieng Khouang is 40 percent Meo-Yao, and Attapeu is 70 percent Kha. That is, the difference in village size on an ethnic basis (Table 14) reflects the different geographic adaptations and land use. The Lao practicing irrigated rice agriculture are able to have the largest, most permanent villages, while the Meo who live on the mountain tops appear to have the smallest and least permanent, with the Kha occupying an intermediate position in terms of geography, population and permanence. Tables 33-38 tend to confirm this generalization. In Luang Prabang Province Meo villages of 200 or 300 do occur but are rare, while those with over 100 inhabitants are not unusual, in marked contrast to the pattern of Lao and even Lao-Theng villages. An important factor not brought out in these figures is the occasional proximity of Meo villages to each other. For the most part they do appear to be widely scattered in Luang Prabang, but certain ecological factors may cause concentrations. Thus on a plateau several hours' walk from Luang Prabang town there are estimated to be some 3,000 Meo living in villages with as many as 80-90 houses each. This clustering is due at least in part to the fact that the soil has a high lime content, making it good for growing opium. By contrast, Lao villages of 500-1,000 population are by no means unusual in Vientiane Province (12 percent of the rural population) although they are less likely to occur in the north. It is also pertinent to note (Table 13) that the average size of villages in Laos has increased almost 50 percent in the past half-century, although exactly how this has affected the different minority groups it is impossible to say in any precise way. One might infer, however, that since the Lao villages are nearest the growing towns and are being reached to an increasing extent by roads, that these trade contacts may have tended to promote population concentrations. Therefore it is likely that the average size of the Lao villages has grown to a greater extent than those of the mountain peoples. It is likely, however,

that at least some Meo villages such as those on the Xieng Khouang plateau have shown increases.

The smaller size, scattering and hence greater inaccessibility of non-Lao villages are implicitly acknowledged in the official five-year development plan of the Lao government. There is considered to have been an underestimation of some 15 percent for certain poorly administered areas: the Provinces of Phong Saly, Vientiane, Savannakhet and Khammouane, and 20 percent for Saravane and Champassac, with 40 percent for Luang Prabang, Sayaboury, Nam Tha and Sam Neua. Taking the census of 1936, one then obtains a corrected figure of 1,247,000 instead of 1,018,000 for 1936; 1,562,000 instead of 1,309,400 for 1951, and 1,703,000 instead of 1,575,450 for 1957. If one takes the electoral lists, composed of approximately 840,000 persons, an even higher figure for the total population appears reasonable -- perhaps 1,700,000 inhabitants. The report concludes that a population of 2,000,000 is a reasonable estimate on which to base the 1958-63 plan. This assumes an annual increase rate of 1.5 percent, which is considerably less than that of 2.03 estimated for the most recent period (Table 6).³¹

This official source also states (apparently quoting a French source for the census of 1936) that the Lao-Tai were underestimated by a factor of approximately 15 percent, while for the proto-Indochinese (Kha or Indonesians as they are referred to in the report) it is 40 percent, and for the Meo 50 percent. Applying these figures to the proportions given in the 1942 census and extrapolating to a census figure of 2,000,000, we arrive at a figure of 820,000 (40 percent) for the Lao, 320,000 (16 percent) for the various Tai peoples, 680,000 (34 percent) for the proto-Indochinese and 100,000 (9 percent) for the Meo-Yao. These figures are exclusive of other groups such as the Vietnamese, Chinese and Europeans, who dwell in the towns. In fact, in most cases the Lao appear to be definitely a minority in the towns demographically speaking, e.g. Pakse with its large Chinese and Vietnamese groups, while in Vientiane, in addition to sizeable communities of these two groups, there also appears to be more immigrants from across the river in Thailand than from Laos proper. According to Pietrantonio (1957: 230) in 1943 the Lao made up 61 percent of the population of Luang Prabang town and only 41.5 percent in Vientiane, with 16, 14, 10 and 11 percent in Savannakhet, Pakse, Xieng Khouang and Thakhek respectively (Table 58).

Ethnically and linguistically speaking the point can be made as far as the rural and urban areas are concerned that Laos has no characteristic population groups that cannot be found in greater numbers in neighboring states. A glance at Tables 65-74 shows that far greater numbers of Meo and Yao reside in North Vietnam and China than in Laos. A similar point can be made with regard to the Tai peoples. The Lao population of Northeast Thailand amounts to approximately 7 million, and of the Northern region some 5 million. There exists a wild Lao irredentism. More important perhaps is the fact that the Thai have annexed parts of Laos when France was weak, e.g. Sayaboury during World War II. As we have seen in the various tables, the Kha constitute a great many individual tribal units. These groups also overlap into North and South Vietnam, Cambodia and Thailand (Table 64).

Although it is of great significance that there are ethnic overlappings with North Vietnam and China, without doubt the most significant cultural relationships are with the Lao of Thailand. The borders with China and North Vietnam are in mountainous country that can be crossed but with difficulty, while the Mekong which marks the Thai-Lao border for much of its length is in no sense an obstacle since the Lao are a riverine people. In fact it encourages contact since the Lao like to fish and traverse the river to trade. Cultural differences between the Lao on the one hand and the Chinese and Vietnamese on the other are strongly felt. There are differences in language, religion, ethos and food habits. ✓

During the current civil war the Royal Lao government has talked darkly of "foreign" soldiers who use chopsticks and eat non-glutinous rice -- an oblique way of referring to the Vietnamese.

The increasing population pressures generated by the Han Chinese (Table 68) provide part of the explanation for the Thai-Iso migrations which culminated in the founding of the Thai capital of Ayuthaya in 1350. During the preceding century there was a legendary migration of Thai-Iso people along the Nam Ou river to the present site of Luang Prabang.³² This was an end result of a long series of southward migrations (Wiens: 1954, 113). During the pre-Chou period (approximately prior to 1000 B.C.) there appears to have been a belt of Thai people on the north bank of the Yangtze. Tattooing being a trait which has characterized the Lao people up to the present time, some scholars feel that it may serve as an indication of the presence of Thai peoples in China. During the Han period (200 B.C.-200 A.D.) tattooed people were found scattered over much of southern China except Yunnan and Kueichou. Their absence from these areas probably indicates that they had not yet migrated to these regions. The general picture presented by the historical records is that of a migration of related Thai peoples, first eastward from Szechwan, then south, and again west and southwest. These migrations are still continuing, the latest arrivals being groups of tribal Tai peoples who have crossed into northern Laos from Yunnan, fleeing the Chinese commune system.³³

A similar situation occurred with regard to the Meo. During the last 500 or 600 years the Meo have been subjected to pressures by the Han Chinese, who have steadily forced them into marginal and mountainous areas and also pushed them southward. The Chinese undertook campaigns against the Meo in 1698, 1732, 1794 and 1855. This warfare resulted in a series of movements by the Meo, one of which was to the eastern part of Yunnan and northern parts of Vietnam and Laos. As indicated earlier, large numbers of Meo and Yao have entered Laos since the beginning of this century. This fact is further confirmed by the present population estimates for the various ethnic groups. The other ethnic groups have approximately tripled since 1911, while the Meo have increased over six-fold. Even discounting the degree of underestimation and confining ourselves to the official figures for 1911 and 1942, we see that in that period the Meo-Yao group more than tripled, while none of the other groups even doubled.

Urban Population

So far we have confined our discussion to the rural population of Laos. An important indication of a country's social, economic or cultural development is its extent of urbanization. A glance at Table 52 clearly shows that Laos is one of the least urbanized areas in Asia even by the most generous estimates (within the definition laid down in the table). Yet it would be quite wrong to assume that the rest of Laos outside of Vientiane is composed only of villages, with a few "overgrown villages" forming the provincial capitals. This is definitely not true in certain specific cases. The royal capital of Luang Prabang -- the official residence of the King -- is certainly not a large village as its population of some 7,600 might lead one to infer. It has a long history as an administrative center, and the fact that it is also the residence of the chief Buddhist monk of Laos emphasizes its importance as a religious center. Luang Prabang has paved streets, a power plant, hospital and airfield. In addition to its administrative personnel there is a significant population of Chinese and Vietnamese who are engaged in commerce and crafts. Clearly, although the town is a major trading center, only a minority of the population is engaged in agriculture.

Although there is no other town in Laos that has the religious or ceremonial importance of Luang Prabang, there are several other towns that are administrative and commercial centers.

If 5,000 is set as a minimum population figure, we can include Savannakhet, Pakse and Thakhek in this category.³⁴ This raises the question as to how to classify the remaining provincial capitals and towns of lesser importance. Table 49 presents a list of 44 communities which are classified as towns. In reality most of them are minor administrative centers (muongs) containing, in many cases, the residence of the Chao Muong or district administrator, a lower court, a police post, a six-year school, perhaps an army company and a practical nurse and usually a few Chinese merchants. With the exception of Nam Tha, Sam Neua, Phong Saly, and possibly Attapeu, where the only Lao are the officials, most of the others are Lao villages where the majority of the inhabitants are farmers with trading sometimes a secondary occupation. Many of these towns, particularly in the south, have road connections, and some are located along rivers; those which are not accessible in these ways in many cases have a landing strip which can be used during the dry season. As provincial capitals Attapeu, Nam Tha, Phong Saly, Sam Neua and Sayaboury would fit in this category. They are distinguished from other secondary towns in that they have regular air service (at least during the dry season), usually a post and telegraph office and often a larger military garrison. There may be other towns in the province which have an equal or greater commercial importance, e.g. Houei Sai in Nam Tha province. By even the most generous estimates 90 percent of the population of Laos are peasants or tribesmen living in rural area, engaged in agriculture or related occupations. Considering that a number of areas usually included in counting the population of the towns are predominantly rural in character, it would seem safe to assume that about 95 percent of the people of Laos are either primarily or exclusively farmers, making it one of the most rural countries in the world.

The overwhelming importance of the Mekong is clearly demonstrated by the fact that all of the important cities of Laos are located along its banks from the trading post of Houei Sai in the north through Luang Prabang, Vientiane, Thakhek, Savannakhet to Pakse in the south. Those towns located in non-Lao areas such as Sam Neua, Phong Saly, Nam Tha, Xieng Khouang and Attapeu are all distinctly of secondary importance. The only town that does not fit into this clearly marked dichotomy is Sayaboury, but the river town of Pak Lay is almost as large even though it lacks the administrative apparatus of a provincial capital. French administrators have, of course, strongly influenced the development of these towns and they are largely responsible for the creation of Thakhek and Savannakhet.

Within the last thirty years most of these towns have about doubled, approximating the increase in the population of Laos as a whole (Tables 50 and 51). Vientiane, which has approximately quadrupled, is the outstanding exception. In this case it is apparent that most of the growth has occurred since the end of the Second World War and the emergence of Laos as a nation. The large scale American aid program, by encouraging urban businesses and subsidizing the growth of government bureaus, the army and police, has greatly contributed to the growth of Vientiane and other towns as well. Not too surprisingly Luang Prabang was the most significant town in Laos at the beginning of the century when it was more than twice the size of Vientiane. If instead of the Census Bureau's estimate of 11,000, we accept the figure of 7,596 (subsequently obtained by the provincial office of this bureau in the royal capital), it appears that its population has remained remarkably stable during the last half century. This cannot be said for towns such as Xieng Khouang, Savannakhet and Saravane, which have grown from villages, in some cases increasing more than twenty-fold. In Table 51 we note that with the exception of Vientiane the towns in the other two provinces for which comparable figures are available appeared to have increased at a somewhat slower rate than the population as a whole.

The ethnic composition of the towns is clearly shown in Table 58.³⁵ The most outstanding fact emerging from these tables is that the towns of Laos are predominantly non-Lao in ethnic composition, an exception being

Luang Prabang where 61 percent were Lao in 1943. But if the predominantly rural areas usually included within the town limits were excluded, it is likely that the percentage of Lao would fall even lower. In any case, in 1943 approximately 30 percent of the "urban" population (in terms of the towns listed in Table 58) was Lao, the remainder being predominantly Vietnamese and Chinese. When comparing the growth of the Chinese and Vietnamese communities between 1921 and 1943 with the increase in the population of Laos as a whole, we find some impressive differences. In these 22 years the population of the country as a whole did not quite double according to the official figures, yet the population of the Chinese increased from approximately 500 to 4,000, or by a factor of 8, while the Vietnamese increased from some 4,100 to 30,700, or more than 7 times. The total gain was approximately 30,000 for both groups during this period. This population alone is almost sufficient to account for the total growth of the major towns during part of this period as given in Table 50. Although not all of these people settled in the major towns it is safe to assume that most of them did, since the Chinese came principally as merchants, petty traders and in some cases as coolies, while the Vietnamese came as craftsmen, gardeners, and many were recruited by the French to serve as technicians and administrators of various kinds.

Between 1943 and 1959 a number of important changes have occurred, but unfortunately statistics for comparison are not available. We must attempt to ascertain the situation indirectly. Among the more significant has been the departure of a large number of Vietnamese, particularly those who were in government service, since Laos gained her independence. As colonial administrators the Vietnamese were very much resented by the Lao. This feeling has a strong traditional basis, since the Lao both fear and distrust the more aggressive Vietnamese. Others who worked as truck-gardeners in the area of Vientiane also left. A number of them were Catholics and the deserted churches in some of the villages around Vientiane testify to this fact. It should be noted, however, that this loss was not a total one, since a number stayed on. Also, with the recent growth of Vientiane a number of Vietnamese have emigrated from overcrowded Saigon and set up small businesses or found jobs in the various service trades. In 1957 approximately 120 more Vietnamese were entering Laos each month than were leaving, so that one could estimate the annual increase by immigration at about 1,500.³⁶

The situation for the Chinese is somewhat different since, unlike the Vietnamese, they were not involved in the government. They prospered greatly in commerce, as the increase in their population attests. According to Table 58 there was an increase of over seven-fold in the Chinese population in the sixteen years between 1943 and 1959, or proportionately equivalent to the increase which had taken place in the preceding 31 years. Beyond doubt the Chinese population did increase but it would be unwise to give to these figures an absoluteness they do not merit. Many Chinese migrated to Laos after World War II. They came from a number of places for a variety of reasons. First, a significant number of soldiers and officers of the Chinese Nationalist Army crossed over into Laos from Yunnan after the occupation of that area by the Communists. Many of these men settled in various towns particularly in the north, established businesses and often married Lao women, since there were few eligible Chinese. Another source of Chinese immigrants has been the cities of Hong Kong, Saigon and Bangkok. Many of them were attracted to Laos by the lure of profits to be made as a result of the commercial boom indirectly fostered by the American aid program. Although easy money was no longer to be made in 1959 and 1960 as it was in 1956 and 1957, many of them have stayed on.

Tables 59-60 provide further information on the Chinese and Vietnamese. It should be noted that in 1953 Laos had not yet assumed de facto control of her own administration, so that many Vietnamese probably left after that date. Today Vientiane remains an important center for both groups, and the Vietnamese as well as Chinese communities in towns such as Pakse and Savannakhet are still strong. One of the difficulties in

evaluating Table 61 is that the Chinese and Vietnamese communities³⁷ are composed not only of foreign born individuals, but also of many people who were born in Laos. This fact is not made evident in the official statistics.³⁸

The Indian population, composed mostly of cloth merchants, has grown from 6 individuals in 1912 to some 957 in 1958. French and Americans also figure appreciably in the Lao urban population. It was estimated that in 1959 there were approximately 8,000 Frenchmen in Laos. Presumably this included the military garrison stationed at the Seno base. Large numbers of Frenchmen serve as military and civilian advisors to the government in various parts of Laos, and there are also many businessmen. Like the Chinese, Frenchmen in this category seem to have increased in recent years. Without a doubt there are more French now in Laos than at the time it was a colony. In 1912, for example, there were only 226 French citizens in the whole country, and in 1937, 574 (the only exception to this statement being the time of the Indochina War, when large numbers of French troops were fighting in Laos).

As to the Americans, except for a few dozen missionaries, almost all of them work for the American government in one of its aid or information programs. A reasonable estimate would be 500 including families. In addition there are a few hundred Filipinos who work in the American aid program, as well as a number engaged in an independent rural medical program called Operation Brotherhood. Both the Americans and Filipinos are new elements in the ethnic mosaic of Laos which did not exist as recently as ten years ago.

If one were to approach the question of Lao urban population composition on a formal statistical basis, this might well be the end of the discussion, but it would have overlooked one of the most crucial groups, which does not appear at all in the official French statistics in any meaningful way.³⁹ These are the Thai and Thai-Lao from the north-east provinces of Thailand. The French were interested in emphasizing the integration of Laos with the other provinces of Indochina bordering on Laos. Although some migration statistics do exist they are obviously not very reliable in a country with only a small number of poorly supervised custom posts and an easily navigable river separating the two countries for much of their common border, particularly in the most populous regions.⁴⁰

It is necessary to define our terms, for the distinctions between the Lao and the Thai-Lao are not readily apparent. First it should be noted that a number of Thai businessmen from Bangkok have come to Vientiane in recent years, as have a number of students seeking jobs, but they are certainly a small minority compared to the Chinese or Vietnamese. Excluded from our consideration are the crossings of villagers who live on opposite sides of the Mekong and exchange produce. Also excluded are the many Lao (elites as well as peasants) who have left their country for an education, job or business venture in Thailand and later returned. What we are particularly interested in is the large scale migrations, often of a temporary nature, of farmers and coolies from the poor and overpopulated Northeast Thailand to the towns of Laos bordering on the Mekong, particularly to Vientiane. Here most of the samlaw drivers and coolies engaged in construction work (both men and women) are from the other side of the river. It is estimated that in 1959 there were 5,000 samlaws in all of Laos, of which a majority were probably operated by Northeast Thai-Lao, who also monopolized this trade in Bangkok before it was banned there. In addition, many come to work in the villages around Vientiane particularly at planting and harvest time.

Of equal importance is the cultural impact the Thai have had on the towns of Laos; although there is a strong French influence in the public buildings and administrative organization, as well as on the viewpoint of the educated classes, Thai culture is felt more strongly by the lower classes in terms of items such as movies, mass circulation newspapers

and magazines (most of the migrants from the Northeast are literate). It is possible that the situation in Laos may be unique, at least in degree: that is, the indigenous population is poorly represented in the towns, the only people of Laos living in them being the Lao officials and some merchants and craftsmen.

With the exception of Xieng Khouang where a few Mao have settled in the towns, the non-Lao tribal peoples do not live in the towns. A partial exception are the Khmu who come to work as coolies in towns such as Luang Prabang but usually return to their own villages in a few months. Conversely there are, however, some Chinese merchants scattered in certain of the larger Lao villages in the countryside.

Age Structure

Although we have previously indicated the severe limitations of Lao and French colonial statistics regarding the total population and its ethnic composition, an even worse situation exists with regard to statistics relating to birth and mortality. Although the United Nations Economic Commission for Asia and the Far East has published a set of figures (see Tables 46-48), the sources on which they are based are unknown, and in any case not available to the Lao Bureau of Statistics, nor published in any French periodicals. Pietrantonio (1953:23) concludes that those figures which were collected by the French administration on natality and mortality are not of any scholarly use.

A somewhat better situation exists with regard to materials on the age structure of the Laos population, but here too there are severe discrepancies in many government reports. There appears to be a tendency in many cases to virtually ignore the group over 60 and to underestimate the number of people under 15. Table 43 brings together material bearing on the Lao from diverse sources in both rural Thailand and Laos which shows a great deal of consistency in a comparative sense. Table 41 shows the close comparability of the data obtained by Pietrantonio for all of Laos in 1943 and the figures obtained from Lao government sources for 1957. The data from the Kha and the Mao-Yao groups are less satisfying. It does not appear logical to attribute the widely varying differences for the tribal groups to different demographic features, although these may exist, but rather to census difficulties. On the whole it is reasonable to assume that they would be less cooperative. It is quite possible that these groups have a higher infant mortality rate and a shorter life span than the Lao, but on the basis of the available data we would not be justified in coming to any firm conclusions. There appears to be less reason to doubt the data in Table 43A since this was obtained from the records of the local Chinese community. The relatively small number of women and of people over 60 seems to be a natural consequence of an immigrant community composed chiefly of males, which established itself in the area during the past few decades. In general, the structure of the Lao population conforms to the age pattern common to the whole area of Southeast Asia (Table 45). The marked larger population under 15 and the smaller proportion of people over 60 are rather striking when contrasted with industrialized countries like France, the United States and even Japan.

As a final note, it can be added that on the basis of the available information there does not appear to be any consistent differences in family size between rural and urban areas (Table 57). There are, however, important differences between ethnic groups, with the Yao and Black Tai having larger household groups than the Lao (Tables 53-55).

FOOTNOTES

- 1 Some observers prefer to divide the year into three seasons: summer from March through June, the rainy season from July through October and winter from November through February.
- 2 Lafont (1959: 9,11).
- 3 Reinach (1901: 92-93).
- 4 One was planned within the next few years, "if sufficient funds are available," but the Lao government is largely dependent on outside aid and a census as such does not appear to have a very high priority. With the present civil war it appears unlikely that any program of this sort will be undertaken in the near future.
- 5 The Lao do not place any great emphasis on exact records. The chaotic condition of official Lao records is in part a result of a lack of technical facilities and in part a lack of interest in precise detail. An aspect of this attitude is that most Lao officials are extremely generous in making available those records they do possess.

Referring to the Kha, one investigator states, "There is no system of counting. If you want to know how many men there are in the village, the head man goes around with a bamboo stick, breaking one knot for each person met, and gives you the knots to count. There is no record of births. Their children were born 'when there was prosperity that year, when the tree was planted' and so on. A schoolteacher, when asked for the birthdates of his children, simply named dates in a series, made up in order to have something for the school record." Jumsai (1959: 20).
- 6 "La Population du Laos de 1912", 1945, Bulletin de la Societe des Etudes Indochinoises, N. S. Tome XXVIII, No. 1, 1953.
- 7 Pietrantoni (1957: 226-28).
- 8 It should be emphasized that these groupings are approximate, and that these tables represent only a summary. One of the greatest difficulties in attempting to identify the various ethnic groups in Laos lies in the fact that they are known by a great variety of names, different ones often used in French, English and Chinese sources while often there are additional Siamese and Lao names for these people as well as names by which these groups refer to themselves. "Meo" is used by the Lao and the French, "Miao" is usually found in Chinese and English language sources, and some Meo groups refer to themselves as "Mung" or "Mong." In the case of a major tribal Tai group we have Black Tai, Tai Noir, or Tai Dam, English, French and Lao versions of the same name. Several attempts are made to summarize the available information (Tables 21, 65, 77, 79), but in most cases the available sources are based on inadequate information. The best attempt to date has been made by John F. Embree and William L. Thomas in Ethnic Groups of Northern Southeast Asia (Yale University, Southeast Asia Studies, New Haven, 1950). It cannot be too strongly emphasized that Laos, despite the work of French ethnographers, remains one of the most poorly known areas of the world from the point of view of ethnography.
- 9 The distinction in spelling is arbitrarily established here for purposes of clarification.
- 10 This system of classification also appears to reflect the desire of Lao government to spread Lao culture and civilization (principally as reflected in language and religion), tendencies which seem to have been encouraged by certain French colonial administrators who used Lao officials to oversee Kha groups. An excellent example is provided by the Kingdom of Luang Prabang which was a semi-autonomous area during the French

FOOTNOTES

(Continued)

- period. One French writer remarked, "When the Commissioner assumes his office [in Luang Prabang], he quickly learns that he has to administer not only the Lao but also the Lu, Tai Neua, Tai Dam, Tai Houn, Mu, Lamet, Kho, Iantene, Koc, Mao, Yao, Ho, Phoutai, Chinese, Vietnamese, and Indians."
- 11 Although this is true of Laos, these divisions are not irreversible -- in parts of China the Miao live in valleys and cultivate irrigated rice, e.g. Margaret P. Mickey, The Courie Shell Miao of Kweichow, Peabody Museum, Vol. 32, No. 1, 1947. Seidenfaden in his epilogue to Wilhelm Credner's Cultural and Geographical Observations Made in the Tali (Yunnan) Region (Siam Society, 1935), p. 19, cites the case of the Lao Song (a Thai group) of Petchaburi who a little over a hundred years ago were living on the plateau of Kieng Khouang from where they were deported as prisoners-of-war by the Siamese to Southern Siam. In certain cases Miao, Yao and Khmu are also settling in the valleys of Laos in response to modern economic drives.
 - 12 The Kingdom of Luang Prabang is said to have been founded in 1353 by Fa Ngum (D. G. E. Hall, A History of South-East Asia, N. Y., 1958, p. 207).
 - 13 Iwata speaks of 12 subdivisions including the Thai Souei, T(h?)ai Neua, Thai Foua, Thai Pouan, Tai Deng, Thai Dai, Thai Houan, Thai Porong, Thai Et, Thai Soum, Thai O, Thai Sot Bau, T(h?)ai Neua and Tai Deng. These subdivisions are indicative of minor dialect variations and also tend to indicate the place of origin such as Xieng Khouang or Sam Neua (Table 18). There also appear to be some minor differences in customs. Generally speaking there does not seem to be restrictions on inter-marriage and in many cases the Lao are not even sure from which group they have originated. As they come more into contact with the towns these minor variations among the Thai-Lao become less significant.
 - 14 In Lao Dam is black, Kao white and Deng red.
 - 15 Roux (1954: 364).
 - 16 Seidenfaden (1958: 24-25).
 - 17 Hang-Seng (1949: 1) identifies them in three different groups.
 - 18 Roux (1954: 301-2).
 - 19 This settlement, about 40 miles north of Vientiane and also known by its French name of Ritaville, appears to be the southernmost extension of the Miao. It is only a few decades old.
 - 20 According to the French scholar Andre Fraisse there have been Yao in northern Laos for three or four centuries while the Miao have come less than a century ago.
 - 21 This is true in Thailand where the Lao represent a minority of inferior social status and the above statement clearly shows the government's policy of emphasizing theoretical unity and equality. In Laos the term Lao has prestige associations.
 - 22 Many of the older men in the Luang Prabang area today are tattooed in this fashion, and in the villages even some of the younger men, but in general the custom appears to be dying out. Khmu are also tattooed.
 - 23 They are descendants of Lao from Vientiane who were taken to Thailand after the destruction of the Lao capital by an invading Thai army early in the 19th century.

FOOTNOTES

(Continued)

24 Regarding the linguistic problems of a Bangkok Thai in Laos, Jumsai (1959: 15) writes, "...It is not difficult for a Lao from the capital to understand the talking and writing of these [Tai] tribes. The language is also akin to the Thai of Bangkok, so that after a few days' stay with each tribe getting my ears used to a different kind of pronunciation and certain distinctive words locally used, it offers me no difficulty to understand them. The writing of each special tribe needs special study, but after some time one can decipher them, since the system of alphabets is everywhere the same, although different styles of writing have developed over the centuries. With the Lao language one can go almost everywhere because although other groups do not speak Lao, their leaders have learned the language through continual contacts with the Lao people of the plains."

25 The official Thai government handbook previously referred to contains the following description of the Khmu (1957: 23):

"This race has its headquarters to the east of the Mae Khong [Mekong] in the Luang Prabang Province. Numbers of them come over every year to work in the teak forests and some of them settle in the country.

"In the north of Kanchanaburi Province there are a few Kamuk [Khmu] villages. These people say they originally came from Luang Prabang, but it is not unlikely they were brought as prisoners-of-war. Some of them still speak their own language, but in dress and customs they conform to their neighbours.

"The Kamuk are also found in Northeastern Thailand....They are not indigenous there but were originally brought to these places by Burmese slave traders about half a century ago."

This is also true of many Kha groups in southern Laos, such as the Sô in the region of Thakhek, who were moved across the Mekong by the Thai for political reasons in a forced migration.

26 The Black Tai provide a modern example of the fact that even today the peoples of Laos are still on the move for reasons similar to those that have caused their migrations in the past -- economics and warfare. Just as the Lao from Vientiane area were deported to Thailand a little over a century ago so Black Tai refugees originating in Dien Bien Phu from the Indochina War have settled on the outskirts of Luang Prabang and Vientiane. Lu from Yunnan have sought refuge in Nam Tha Province just as a century or so before some of their forefathers migrated south to Luang Prabang Province.

27 The three Yao villages that Iwata investigated in the area of Vang Vieng are estimated to be 14, 20 and 50 years old respectively.

28 The Communists have stressed education of these groups, and in 1960 it was estimated that 8.2% of all students in the Democratic Republic of Vietnam (North Vietnam) were of minority nationalities. Although this figure is smaller than their proportion in the total population (14.3) it is still very significant and appears to represent a great increase. Traditional trade patterns are also important. In 1960 during the Souvanna Phouma "neutralist" government's tenure an agreement was negotiated with the DRV on border exchanges, a development of some importance since the same ethnic groups live on both sides of the political boundary. There were road connections in the colonial period.

29 Here the Lao were only 8% of the total population in 1930 -- the majority (56%) were Kha.

FOOTNOTES

(Continued)

- 30 In 1956 one Lao government source estimated that Vientiane Province contained about 600 Yao, 4,000 Miao and 2,500 Kha. This would reduce the ethnic Lao to about 96 percent.
- 31 (Plan de Developement Economique et Social, Royaume du Laos:Vientiane, 1959: 9-11).
- 32 Hall, op. cit., p. 145.
- 33 An article in the New York Times quoting the Yunnan "Jihpao" states that Chinese settlers have begun a large-scale migration into Yunnanese areas bordering on North Vietnam, Laos and Burma. Approximately 18,000 migrants from Hunan are included in this move with additional tens of thousands expected to follow during the next few years. According to present plans the total may reach 100,000. The first arrivals were sent to state farms in the Tai autonomous area on the Lao border and to the Red River Valley near Vietnam. New villages are said to have been established and roads built. Tillman Durdin, New York Times, January 21, 1960.
- 34 Xieng Khouang might perhaps be included. That is, these provincial capitals are distinguished from the others by the Lao government in that they each contain certain government facilities not present in the other administrative centers, e.g. a hospital and college (Junior High School).
- 35 Other factors being equal it appears reasonable to assume that the figures for the urban populations and their composition are more accurate than the statistics for rural areas.
- 36 Obviously this situation has changed with the Civil War in 1960-1961, and the partial destruction of Vientiane, although to what extent it is difficult to know.
- 37 In many of the larger towns both groups have their own administrative organizations and the Chinese have their own system of private schools in towns such as Luang Prabang, Vientiane and Pakse.
- 38 There has doubtless been some attrition of these communities over the years as some of the offspring of mixed Lao-Chinese or Lao-Vietnamese marriages have merged into the general urban Lao population. Schooling seems a key factor here; those who study in the Chinese schools remain in the Chinese community.
- 39 One Thai is recorded as living in Laos in 1912.
- 40 In 1957 it was estimated that about 2700 Thai a month were entering Laos, and an almost equal number departing. (Bulletin Statistique du Laos, 1958, No. 4, p. 80).

Note: This paper is an expansion and revision of data that originally appeared in the author's, Aspects of Village Life and Culture Change in Laos (Council on Economic and Cultural Affairs, N.Y., August 1958), Chapter One. Summary information is contained in the handbook, Laos, its people, its society, its culture (HRAF Press, New Haven, 1960), Chapters 3 and 4, prepared in consultation with the author.