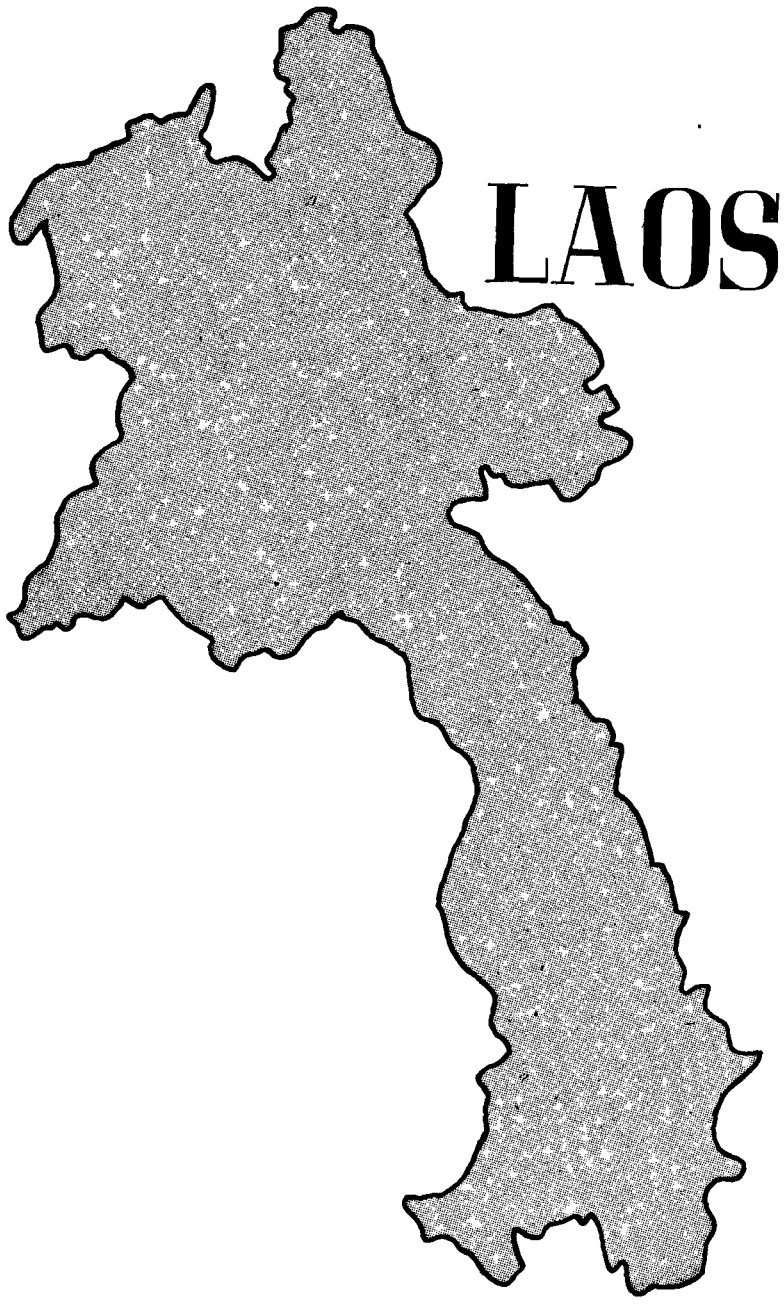


LAOS:

War and Revolution

Edited by

Nina S. Adams and Alfred W. McCoy

A publication of the
Committee of Concerned Asian Scholars

HARPER COLOPHON BOOKS
Harper & Row, Publishers
New York, Evanston, and London

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FIRST EDITION: Harper Colophon Books

LIBRARY OF CONGRESS CATALOG CARD NUMBER: 76–140188

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Woodside has observed,[2] no Vietnamese state can afford to allow hostile forces to dominate any particular element of an upland population that spills over into the hills of Vietnam, because this makes possible infiltration by hostile elements. Woodside has noted that it is no coincidence that the areas that sustain the Vietnamese-supported Pathet Lao movement (such as Sam Neua and Tran-ninh) are those border territories which Minh Mang seized in reaction to Thai penetration of the Lao states. These are reasons, to quote him, "why, whether we like it or not, no Vietnamese government, Communist or non-Communist, is ever going to follow a policy of 'hands off Laos.'" As for Thailand, we may say exactly the same thing regarding the (Lao) Mekong territories of Luang Prabang, Vientiane, and Champassak. In our century, as in earlier ones, stability is possible only if Vietnam and Thailand reach a mutual, if tacit, resolution of their centuries-long conflict over Laos. Stability can be sustained only if the great powers cease to fish in troubled waters.

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French Colonialism in Laos, 1893–1945

Alfred W. McCoy

Throughout more than a half-century of colonial rule, the kingdom of Laos remained a quaint, neglected backwater of France's Indochina empire. While 40,000 Frenchmen crowded into Saigon and the Mekong Delta to compete for jobs ranging from governor to traffic cop, the French colonial administration often found it difficult to get enough men to fill the meager 100 positions that were allotted to Laos on the general Indochina budget. Those Frenchmen who did agree to go to Laos often went for a short term, having been promised that they would be remembered on the promotion lists in later years for having endured this hardship. This attitude was reflected in their work, for French colonial officials in Laos generally spent most of their time chasing the local women, seeking or avoiding addiction to alcohol or opium, and dreaming of their return to Saigon or Hanoi.

Although this reaction to Laos was typical of most of the French colonial officials who served there, it was by no means true of all of them. Indeed, because so many of their countrymen did so little, Laos was a place where a dynamic and pioneering official could assume authority and have an impact far beyond his years and official rank. Since most French officials were content to let Laos flow along undisturbed so long as the opium smuggling did not reach outrageous proportions, everybody paid his taxes, and there was no rebellion in the hills, French policy in Laos was the work of a very few men.

In fact, it might more correctly be said that the French legacy in Laos was the work of two men: Auguste Pavie and Charles Rochet. It was the dedicated explorer Auguste Pavie who conducted his "conquest of hearts" in the 1880s and 1890s by trekking barefoot across the hills and river valleys of Laos seeking trade routes, tribal alliances, and political relations. With a

unique combination of warm sympathy and hard political bargaining, Pavie was able to win Laos away from Thai control and secure it as a French colony by forging a series of political alliances with the Lao royal courts and the highland tribal federations. Pavie also served as the colony's first governor; the administrative and political relations he established remained the basis of French rule until 1940. Pavie believed himself the father of all the Lao and called them "my dear children" in his letters. He and his successors treated the Lao as charming but incompetent children, denied them all effective political authority, and kept them in a state of prolonged national adolescence.

However, in 1940, when Japan's influence spread throughout Southeast Asia, bringing with it the shock waves of Pan-Asian nationalism, the delicate structure of French paternal rule was shattered. Backed by Japan, Thailand proclaimed itself the homeland of the Tai race (which includes the Lao) and began a campaign to win over the Lao. The French responded by having Charles Rochet launch the Lao national movement. Through education, literature, and mass rallies, Rochet revived the Lao sense of national identity. The French then gave the Lao greater political authority and hoped that by giving a little they could hold Laos forever. However, once awakened, Lao national consciousness grew dramatically—to the point where Laos desired and achieved its independence in 1945. However, achieving independence so quickly after having been dominated for so long left Laos a shaken, nervous, and factionalized society. Even though Pavie had furthered France's interest by making the Lao think of themselves as French, and Rochet had sought to do the same by reminding the Lao that they were Lao, both men inadvertently promoted tension and conflict that are still present in Laos today.

The French Conquest of Laos

The French conquest of Laos in the 1880s and 1890s was the last stage of 35 years of French expansion in Indochina. It was not their interest in Vietnam, Laos, or Cambodia which involved

the French, but rather their interest in China—in particular in the vast potential of Chinese markets. The French had watched with envy while Britain secured enormous profits through domination of the China trade and with bitterness as they noted that France's consumption of one-half of Shanghai's and one-third of Canton's silk exports in the 1870s (and over one-half of all of China's silk exports in the 1880s) was one of the major reasons that the China trade was so profitable for England. England's control over Hong Kong (Canton) and Shanghai meant that the silk was shipped on British vessels to London before it could be shipped to France—all to England's profit. Thus, the French sought a port of their own in Indochina which could be used as a base from which France's shipping could challenge England's. More ambitiously, they sought a back door to China which would entirely avoid the English-dominated ports.[1]

In 1858 the French sent the first of several naval expeditions to Danang to secure it as a port for French shipping. However, since Danang was so close to the royal court at Hue, Vietnamese resistance was strong and the French were unable to secure their position. Finally, in July of 1861 the French captured Saigon, established a permanent garrison, and began their annexation of Cochin China (Saigon and the Mekong Delta). Saigon was not only a suitable port, but it had the advantage of being close to the mouths of the Mekong, which the French believed would give them their backdoor to southwest China. Acting on these beliefs, in 1866 the French colonial administration dispatched an expedition to explore the Mekong River and assess its feasibility as a trade route to southern China. Although the one surviving leader of the expedition, Francis Garnier, reported in 1868 that the Mekong was too long and had too many rapids to be of any use for navigation, he asserted that the Red River, which ran from south China to the Tonkin Gulf, was a good alternate route.

However, because of the shock of its defeat in the Franco-Prussian War in 1870 and the subsequent turmoil in French

1. John Laffey, *French Imperialism and the Lyon Trade Mission.* Ph.D. thesis (Cornell University, 1966).

domestic politics, it was not until 1882 that a French expedition set off from Saigon to conquer the Tonkin delta. The Vietnamese emperor was disturbed by the French expedition and resisted, ordering his garrisons to fight and forging a military alliance with the Ho armies. The Ho were remnants of a Chinese messianic revolutionary movement (the Taipings) who had been forced to retreat into the hills of northern Vietnam and Laos following their eviction from China ten years earlier. Despite stiff Vietnamese resistance, by August of 1883 the French armies had bombarded and occupied the royal capital. They completed their conquest of all of Vietnam by imposing a French protectorate on the remaining parts of the country.

With the conquest of the Tonkin delta and the assumption of a protectorate over the Vietnamese imperial court, French involvement in Laos became inevitable. By establishing a protectorate over the imperial court, France fell heir to traditional Vietnamese claims on Laos. More significantly, the hills of northern Vietnam and Laos had become the refuge for rebellious imperial court officials who allied themselves with the Ho armies and the Tai Tribal Federation in order to combat the French. Until these groups were subdued, travel and commerce between French possessions and southern China would be impossible.

Both the conquest of Tonkin and the assumption of Vietnamese claims in Laos served to bring France into direct contact and conflict with Thai and British expansion. In 1886 Upper Burma fell to the British. And at about that time the Thai sent troops into Laos to defend their claims in the area. The French realized that their commercial control over south China would be greatly weakened if Britain and its Thai client were able to gain control over the Mekong and develop a competing trade down its course to northeast Thailand, where goods could be shipped overland to Bangkok. The French had also begun a new series of explorations for navigable channels on the Mekong, and there was hope that the Mekong too might give France another access to China. One French colonial official, exulting at the prospect of wealth that awaited France's conquest of the Mekong valley, declared:

> One quick glance at the map will show that the Indochinese Union forms a neat package, bordered by natural frontiers which are: the Annamese Sea on the south and east; the great Mekong River, on the west and north; the Chinese frontier on the north. . . . The rights of protectorate favor our own national products. In this way we assure ourselves a monopoly on trade with 27,000,000 people. The minimal transit tax and a light tariff in transit goods will develop exchange currency with Yunnan, Kwangsi, and Kwangtung, and will give us a clientele of 40,000,000 Chinese at a minimum. The general trade traffic will give us a base of 67,000,000 consumers.[2]

Several times during its most intense period (from 1886 to 1893), the struggle for the Mekong valley almost sparked war between England, Thailand, and France. However, the competing interests were ultimately reconciled by diplomatic agreements hastened to completion by a few minor skirmishes. Throughout the contest England remained the calmest of the rivals, for it held the ultimate power to decide the outcome of the conflict. England dominated Thailand, ruled Burma and the Indian subcontinent, and controlled the largest portion of the China trade. The English navy would impose a settlement if diplomacy failed.

England's major goals were to keep the French at a comfortable distance (by preserving a buffer between British and French territories in northern Burma and Laos) and to maintain the independence of Bangkok and the Menam valley, where all of its commerce with Thailand was conducted.[3] In contrast, the French were desperate to expand their relatively meager holdings by gaining what they imagined to be an easily exploitable river empire. They were willing to risk war to gain these ends.[4] Thailand simply wanted to hold what it already had. Luang Prabang, central Laos, and lower Laos (Champassak) were its clients. Since without England's support Thailand would ultimately have to yield, and England felt there was little worth fighting for, France seemed to have the upper hand in Laos.

2. Charles Lemire, *Le Laos Annamite* (Paris: Librairie Coloniale, 1894).
3. Claire Hirschfield, "Struggle for the Mekong Banks," *Journal of Southeast Asian History* (March 1968), p. 49.
4. *Ibid.*, p. 48.

However, because France lacked a cabal of officials, missionaries, or merchants capable of forging an alliance with a Lao political group, and because many of its troops were tied down suppressing the Vietnamese Royalist Rebellion, France had, apparently, no means by which to conquer Laos. Even if the French had had sufficient strength for a military conquest, a direct clash with Thailand might have drawn in England—a contest France would certainly have lost. Thus, in 1886 the French were faced with the alternatives of making a peaceful conquest or postponing their effort until some future date by which time Thai influence might be reestablished. It was Auguste Pavie who made this peaceful conquest possible.

The struggle began on September 21, 1886, when Thailand's King Chulalongkorn announced that he was sending an army to the Laotian principality of Xieng Khouang and the Sip Song Chau Tai cantons (the Tai Federation; the name literally means "the 12 cantons" [regions]) of Lai Chau, Son La, and Dien Bien Phu to put down the Ho armies that were ravaging the area. This was actually a thinly disguised attempt to reestablish Thai control over Laos, and the French responded to the challenge nine days later when Auguste Pavie set out for Luang Prabang. In this first mission, Pavie was accompanied by only eight Cambodian assistants whom he had recruited in Phnom Penh.[5]

Although at first glance this may not have seemed like an even match, Pavie was more than equal to the task. He had first come to Indochina in 1869 as a regular army sergeant. He later became a telegraph operator and developed a strong interest in Southeast Asian cultures while stationed at the end of the line in a racially diverse corner of Cambodia.[6] Pavie's study won him a job as a survey geographer for the colonial government, and his wide travels gave him the ability to adapt quickly to Indochina's diverse peoples and grasp the subtleties of their local politics.

On September 30, 1886, the French government sent Pavie on

5. Paul le Boulanger, *Histoire du Laos Français* (Paris: Librairie Plon, 1931), p. 257.

6. Albert de Pouvourville, *Auguste Pavie* (Paris: Larose, 1933), pp. 11–13.

his first trip to Laos. He and his Cambodian assistants arrived in Luang Prabang the following February. There he tried to make contact with the royal court and to begin establishing political relations with the king; but the Thai kept Pavie under close surveillance, and he suffered several weeks of absolute failure.

In May 1887 the Thai expeditionary force withdrew most of its troops from Laos and the Sip Song Chau Tai and returned to Bangkok with hostages from the ruling Deo family of the Sip Song Chau Tai and from the royal courts at Luang Prabang and Xieng Khouang. However, the leader of the Tai Federation, Deo Van Tri, reacted rather differently than the Thai had expected. On June 7, 1887, Deo Van Tri and 600 of his Ho allies arrived in Luang Prabang and drove off the Thai garrison. For three days, Deo Van Tri sacked the city to avenge the kidnapping of his brothers. On June 10 the Ho set fire to the Royal Palace and a number of the Buddhist temples and began to drive the population from the city. In the confusion the 76 year-old king, Oun Kham, was left in the burning palace until Pavie's Cambodian assistant, Keo, risked the flames to carry him out of the palace and down to the banks of the Mekong, where Pavie and the city's population were embarking. Pavie accompanied the king downstream, and when they reached a refuge at Paklay he and his assistants tended the sick king, conducted a search for the royal archives, and helped organize the settlement of the refugees. After three months together, Pavie records that Oun Kham assured him that

> our kingdom is not a conquest of Thailand. Luang Prabang, wanting protection against all attacks, voluntarily offered its tribute. Now through Thailand's interference, our ruin is complete. Now if my son consents, we will offer tribute to France, sure that it will guard us against all future evils.[7]

Pavie had gained an important ally for France.

Pavie devoted the remaining months of his first mission (which lasted until 1889) to the subjugation of the Sip Song Chau Tai

7. Boulanger, *op. cit.*, p. 269.

and the destruction of the Ho armies which were still the dominant power in the area. In the fall of 1887 the French launched a sizable military expedition up the Black River from Hanoi in an attempt to suppress Deo Van Tri and his Ho allies. Pavie arrived in the area in January 1888 and began a much more successful campaign. It was Pavie's feeling that the Tai were tired of incessant warfare and would willingly exchange a military alliance with the Ho for a peaceful alliance with the French. Therefore, he began negotiations with the various Tai chiefs, and in October secured the release of Deo's brothers from the Thai in Bangkok in exchange for the Tai-French alliance. When they lost their major ally, the Ho soon surrendered and, in Deo Van Tri, Pavie gained another invaluable friend for France.[8]

By the time his first mission ended, Pavie had forged two powerful political alliances which were to serve as the ultimate basis for France's claims in Laos. At the outset of his second mission (1889–1891) the colonial government, recognizing the importance of his work, gave Pavie a greatly expanded staff (20 colonial officials) and considerable financial support. The Pavie mission, accompanied by representatives of a commercial company called the French Syndicate of Laos, began a scientific exploration of Laos' peoples, products, and geography and the construction of a systematic network of political relations with the local leaders.

With their claims and their presence firmly established, the French moved to secure formal recognition of their position. During negotiations with England over the Mekong problem in 1892, the British made it quite clear that they would do nothing to prevent French seizure of Lao territories east of the Mekong.[9]

In February 1893 Pavie became the French representative in Bangkok, and in May the French used one of the perennial "incidents" between Thai and French troops as an excuse to send three columns of troops into central and southern Laos. The arrival of these troops provoked even more serious "incidents,"

8. *Ibid.*, p. 283.
9. Hirschfield, *op. cit.*, p. 30.

which then served as the French pretext for dispatching three gunboats up the Menam River to Bangkok. On July 12, 1893, the Thai garrison at Paknam hit one of these ships with an artillery barrage, and this incident was used by pro-imperialist elements in the French Assembly to secure an ultimatum demanding the cession of all Lao territories east of the Mekong. By October the Thai had yielded to this pressure. They assured French hegemony in the Mekong basin by ceding all lands on the east bank of the river. French control over the east bank territories was confirmed in 1896 when the British gave up the idea of a buffer zone in upper Laos and yielded the east bank to the French in exchange for a guarantee of the security of the Menam valley. Later, in exchange for the 25-kilometer neutral zone along the Mekong's west bank, the Thai gave the Laotian provinces of Champassak and Sayaboury to the French in 1904 and 1907.[10]

The Establishment of French Control

For the French, Laos was defined by the eastern half of the Mekong River basin, and boundaries were carefully drawn to conform with the exact limits of the Mekong watershed. When the colonial government demarcated Laos' common borders with Burma, China, and Vietnam, the survey teams simply determined the limits of the Mekong's watershed and adopted these as the borders of Laos. In reality, the French borders meant absolutely nothing to the people of Laos. What the French thought of as a clearly defined political unit was one of the most racially and politically complex areas of Southeast Asia. The Lao themselves accounted for only about 45 per cent of the total population, while the remainder was composed of Meo, Kha, and Tai tribes in the north and about 60 different Kha tribes in the south. People of the same tribe, political grouping, and often the same family were separated by the arbitrary border. Indeed, in their insistence in defining Laos in terms of the Mekong basin the

10. *Ibid.*, pp. 49–52.

French completely ignored existing political structures and carved a colony out of segments of existing states and federations.

The consequences of this policy can best be seen in the French treatment of the Lu Federation and the six cantons of Sam Neua province. In northern Laos the French created a politically unstable situation by annexing two cantons from the great Lu state, the Sip Song Panna (literally, "the 12,000 rice fields"). The Lu were a highly developed people who spoke a language similar to Lao and Thai, had adopted Buddhism from Burma, but were most influenced by Chinese culture. About two-thirds of all Lu males could read and write in Chinese characters, and their highly centralized court bureaucracy was based on Confucian organizational principles. The Sip Song Panna extended from northern Laos and Burma along the Mekong River into China's southern Yunnan province.[11] Although its borders had changed considerably through its 1,000-year history, in the 1890s the Sip Song Panna occupied 6,000 square miles and consisted of 28 cantons, each of which was surrounded by rolling hills that spread off to the east and west of the Mekong. The Lu lived in the cantonal valley states, each of which was dominated by a local hierarchy directly subordinate to the Lu capital at Ch'eli. While the Lu valley dwellers made up only about half of the population in each canton, they maintained friendly political relations with the minority tribes who lived in the hills.[12] By annexing one Lu canton in Nam Tha province and another in Phong Saly, the French aroused tremendous resentment among the Lu, which later produced two major insurrections.

While the western half of the territories which make up Sam Neua province are a part of the Mekong River basin, the eastern half is drained by rivers that flow into the Tonkin Gulf. Accordingly, in 1896 the French governor of northern Laos announced that the eastern half of Sam Neua province would be

11. William Clifton Dodd, *The Tai Race* (Cedar Rapids, Iowa: Torch Press, 1923), p. 187.

12. Frank M. Lebar, Gerald C. Hickey, and John K. Musgrave, eds., *Ethnic Groups of Mainland South East Asia* (New Haven: Human Relations Area Files [HRAF], 1964), pp. 207–212.

transferred to Vietnam. In doing so the French ignored the fact that since the thirteenth century the Black and Red Tai populations of these cantons had shared a common history, culture, and political structure. The Tai in the eastern canton began a mass exodus to the west, and when the eastern canton became virtually depopulated by 1903 the French finally reunified the area.[13]

When the French acquired Laos in 1893 they still entertained the fantasy that it would be a profitable river empire. The colonial government's delusion was shared by the French Syndicate of Laos, whose Parisian backers supplied 100,000 francs in capital, 15 tons of trading goods, and 10 trading posts along the Mekong. Within two years the venture collapsed, because the Mekong proved a poor transportation route and the French merchants failed in competition with the Chinese for Laos' 400,000 poor customers.[14]

With the collapse of the Syndicate, responsibility for administration fell upon the colonial government. In 1895, 14 provinces were created and placed under governors for upper and lower Laos, but four years later they were unified under a single governor, who directed a highly centralized administration in Vientiane. Although Laos' first governor, Auguste Pavie, had promised the king of Luang Prabang his autonomy, the French governor assumed absolute authority, and the artificial distinction the French made between indirect administration in the kingdom of Luang Prabang and direct administration in the rest of Laos was little more than legal fiction.

After the dream of instant wealth faded, the French resigned themselves to maintaining order and managing their administration as inexpensively as possible so that it would not become too much of a strain on the general Indochina budget. Since one of the largest expenses of any colonial budget was the support of European officials at their normal standard of living,

13. André Boutin, "Monographie de la Province des Houa-Phans," *Bulletin des Amis du Laos*, #1 (September 1937), Hanoi, p. 72.

14. Lucien de Reinach, *Le Laos* (Paris, 1911). Translated by HRAF, p. 9; Pierre Grossin, *Notes sur L'Histoire de la Province de Cammon* (Hanoi, 1933), p. 42.

the French kept their colonial staff in Laos to such an absolute minimum that in 1904 the contingent of 72 officials was the smallest anywhere in the French Empire. With so few men the French had to conduct their administration by adapting themselves to the Lao feudal court structures in the lowlands and by manipulating the tribal-racial hierarchies in the mountains.[15]

In the lowland areas the traditional Lao political structure provided a convenient means for carrying out this policy. The five major lowland principalities had a uniform administrative system with villages grouped into districts (*tasseng*), and districts grouped into cantons (*muong*). The French simply grouped the cantons into provinces and guaranteed the loyalty of the Lao officials by assuming the right to approve all appointments and by making officials swear their traditional Buddhist oath to the French Republic instead of to their king.[16] The most subordinate positions in the provincial bureaucracies (translators, low-level clerks) were manned by the Gallicized Lao elite, the middle-level positions by French-educated Vietnamese, and the very highest positions were reserved for French officials. So efficient was this system that in 1938 there were only three French officials (commissioner, assistant commissioner, and military officer) in all of Saravane province; and these three successfully administered 6 cantons, 36 districts, and 596 villages.[17]

Although the French administration held all substantive power, the colonial government preserved the traditional royal families and used them as religious symbols to maintain popular compliance with French administration.[18] Out of the five great royal houses of Laos, only three had survived the turmoil of the nineteenth century; Xieng Khouang, Champassak, and Luang Prabang. (See article 5, by Whitmore.) Because of the special relationship between Pavie and the royal family of Luang Prabang, the French ended two centuries of aristocratic competition by reducing the kings of Xieng Khouang and Champassak to governors, thus leaving Luang Prabang the only kingdom in Laos. Although they had no legal right to do so, the French further extended their control over the kings and princes by approving their successors, thus making sure that an heir favorable to France would emerge. For example, when Prince Kham Huang of Xieng Khouang instigated the local Meo rebellion against the French in 1896 to protest his demotion to governor, the French merely had him deposed, replacing him with a member of another branch of his family who had served as a French official in Vietnam and Laos.[19]

15. *Ibid.*, p. 372.
16. *Ibid.*, pp. 125–127.
17. Joel Halpern, "Population Statistics and Associated Data," *Laos Project* Paper #3 (Los Angeles: UCLA Press, 1961), Table XIV.
18. François Iché, *Le Statut Politique et International du Laos Français.* Ph.D. thesis (Université de Toulouse, 1935), p. 198.

Although over half of the population of Laos was hill tribes, the French lacked the manpower, finances, and interest to deal with these widely scattered peoples. The French demanded heavy taxes, opium, porters, and corvée road work from these tribes, but gave them absolutely nothing in return. This exploitative attitude was explained by a French colonial official who traveled extensively in the hills of southern Laos. According to him,

> it does not seem . . . that this savage race, indolent, superstitious, nonprogressive, can be called upon to play an important role in Indochina. It seems that they will be of no use for our civilizing actions, for which they will create nothing but obstacles. Their pathetic weakness will not permit them, after all, to maintain their position against the more active races of Vietnam and Laos, who are encircling and penetrating more and more each day. . . . It is a positive good for our colonization that this exodus be heightened under our direction and the savage races will be blended with their neighbors into a mestizo race which, resisting the mountain climate better than the Laotians and Vietnamese, will be able to realize all of the resources of this region.[20]

In order to have the hill tribes deliver the taxes, porters, opium (or whatever was demanded of them) regularly and

19. Charles Archaimbault, "Les Annales de L'Ancien Royaume de S'ieng Khuang," *Bulletin de L'Ecole Française d'Extrême-Orient* (1967), pp. 595–596.
20. M. A. Lavalée, "Notes Ethnographiques sur Diverses Tribus," *Bulletin de L'Ecole Française d'Extrême-Orient* (1904), p. 311.

reliably without incurring the expenses of any kind of direct relationship, the French used a system of cross-racial administration which established a brutal ethnic hierarchy, and, especially in northern Laos, pitted the various ethnic groups against each other. The French used traditional racial hierarchies where they were strong, reinforced them where they were weak, and created them where they did not exist. This system of control without direct contact had another advantage for the French. By deflecting peoples' anger at the race above or below them on the scale, the French administration was able to exploit extremely independent and volatile groups without ever incurring any direct hostility. However, the condition of the mass of the tribesmen on the lower rungs of the hierarchy was little better than slavery, since their traditional subordination was compounded by heavy French taxes which produced unbearable demands on their meager resources.

The Lamet tribe of southern Nam Tha province provides a clear example of how this cross-racial administration worked. The Lamet were a Kha tribe whose 4,000 members lived in a hundred or so villages that were located on the southern border of the province. The Lamet were not particularly aggressive and had paid their tribute of beeswax regularly to the Thai without coercion from any chiefs or tribal leaders. When the French arrived, they created a hierarchy by appointing a Lamet in each village as a combination tax collector-chief and by creating a special Lamet canton (*muong*) whose administrators and tax collectors were Lu. Thus, a Lamet village chief (never really accepted by his village as a legitimate leader) reported to a Lu tax collector who was responsible to a Lao canton chief who in turn probably dealt with a Vietnamese bureaucrat subordinate to one of the four Frenchmen in Nam Tha province. The French appointed the Lu as administrators because they were literate and had experience dealing with the Lamet. But, as with many interracial hierarchical relationships, the Lu overtaxed for their personal profit, sold titled positions to rich Lamet at high prices, levied disproportionate fines for small offenses, and took every step possible to extort from the Lamet. When the situation reached the crisis stage, the French were able to pacify the

Lamet simply by replacing the Lu district chief with a French-educated Lao.[21]

Similarly, the French administered the Meo through Tai and Lao intermediaries. The colonial government never made its demands (for the opium tax, a heavy head tax, corvée labor, or food requisitions) through French officials. Thus, when the Meo rebelled in 1919 against tax demands (which in many cases were inflated because of Lao-Tai corruption), it was the Lao who were massacred, not the French.[22] French officials were able to make contact with Meo at will and were able to draw off much of the rebels' support merely by offering direct French administration.[23]

In a situation where the French dealt directly with a minority group, they themselves were the target of protest. The French supervised the Chinese minority in Laos through "congregations" whose leaders were directly responsible to French provincial commissioners. Therefore, in 1914, when Chinese merchants became angered at increased taxation on opium marketing, they assaulted the French garrison at Sam Neua and tried to avenge themselves on French officials.[24]

Thus, if a racial or territorial group was aggressively independent, did not have a distinct political hierarchy that could be manipulated, and was unwilling to be dominated by any other ethnic group, it could maintain its independence from the French. Unfortunately for them, not many of the Laotian hill tribes displayed these characteristics, and even those who did had to put up a long and costly resistance to maintain their autonomy.

The French Administration of Laos, 1893–1940

Once the speculative bubble of the Laotian *Eldorado* burst in the 1890s and the French realized that there were no easy pro-

21. Karl G. Izikowitz, *Lamet* (Göteborg: Elanders Boktryckni Aktiebolag, 1951), p. 346.
22. Barthelemy, *Note sur la Décentralisation Administrative et une Politique des Races au Laos* (Paris), p. 140.
23. F. M. Savina, *Histoire des Miao* (Hong Kong, 1930), pp. 238–239.
24. Boutin, *op. cit.*, p. 74.

fits to be made, Laos became the neglected stepchild of Indochina. Some Frenchmen shared the view of Governor General Paul Doumer, who declared that Laos "constitutes the agricultural, forestry, and possibly the mineral reserve of our Indochina, and . . . will be called to a brilliant future."[25] But even such perennial optimists postponed that future to an indefinite date. Since the French regarded the hill tribes as savages and the Lao as charming but incompetent children, the little economic and social development that did take place in Laos was not done by or for the Lao.

Although colonial governments everywhere boasted of the vast improvement in the health conditions of the natives through the introduction of modern medicine, similar claims could not be made in Laos. The limited French medical facilities consisted of one hospital in Vientiane, clinics in each provincial capital (staffed by one European doctor and a Vietnamese assistant), and an occasional paramedical clinic in one of the larger outlying cities. The hospital and clinics served the Europeans, government officials, and the few Lao who lived in cities. (The Lao were a minority of the urban population.) The public health corps tried merely to prevent the spread of plagues which might eventually reach the cities. The French failed to reduce Laos' infant mortality rate, and during the last 12 years of French administration the number of medical facilities and personnel declined steadily.[26]

Because the French had little use for educated Laotians, by 1940 there were only 7,000 primary school students in a colony of one million people. Not a single high school was constructed. Rather than spending funds to develop a modern school system, in 1907 the French decided that the traditional two or three years of religious education at the local Buddhist temple would suffice.[27] In 1933 there was an attempt to hand out chalk, blackboards, and some training to the teaching monks, but those who received training were hired by the colonial administration, and

25. Paul Doumer, *L'Indochine Française* (Paris, 1930), p. 292.
26. Boutin, *op. cit.*, p. 118. Charles Rochet, *Pays Lao* (Paris: Jean Vigneau, éditeur, 1946), p. 61.
27. *Bulletin de L'Ecole Française d'Extrême-Orient* (1907), pp. 412–413.

the program died. In 1932 Prince Phetsarath summed up the French effort by saying,

> the official monk schools have degenerated into training schools for administrative employment. As for the pagoda schools, they have never been organized except on paper, there has never been any effective authority responsible for them, and they continue to function as before.[28]

France's greatest scheme for Laos involved the construction of a complete, all-weather road network linking Laos with Vietnam, thereby enabling the future development of the country and permanently denying Laos to Thailand. Since Laos' natural route to the sea was across northeast Thailand to Bangkok, French road construction across the rough Annamite mountains was an attempt to defy geographical reality, and the difficult task was only partially completed. The road construction was done with forced labor drawn from the whole male population and was bitterly resented. The Lao could not see any logic in this grandiose master plan, which ignored the fact that all of their commerce was conducted between neighboring villages on footpaths and not between Saigon and Vientiane.[29] Since the extensive roads were built for the future by a presently small population, villagers often had to travel 20–30 miles from their homes to the construction site, where they were driven hard by civil engineers eager to set new construction records. Often the demands were so heavy, as in Phong Saly province from 1917 to 1924, that whole districts fled until the work was finished.[30]

The self-supporting village economy of over 90 per cent of Laos' inhabitants was virtually untouched by the French. Most of the new urban commerce generated by the French presence was taken over by the Chinese, any new crafts were dominated

28. Etienne Boul, "La Rénovation des Ecoles de Pagode au Laos," *Bulletin General d'L'Instruction Publique* (September 1933), p. 6.
29. Norton S. Ginsberg, ed., *Area Handbook on Laos* (New Haven: HRAF, 1955), p. 101.
30. G. Ayme, *Monographie du V^e Territoire Militaire* (Hanoi: Imprimerie d'Extrême-Orient, 1930), pp. 126–127.

by the Vietnamese, and the technicians that were needed were either French or Vietnamese.[31] Although the French introduced coffee growing in the Bolovens Plateau and substantially improved the opium-growing methods in Xieng Khouang province, they made few attempts to improve the production of Laos' staple crops—rice and maize—and thus had little impact on Laos' major economic activity—agriculture.

The one resource the French did develop was tin, mined at Nam Pathene in Khammouan province. These mines had been worked for centuries by Lao, who dug shallow trenches in the highland river banks and sent the tin to the Gulf of Siam, where it was used as fish-net ballast. In 1923 European prospectors discovered its potential; by 1937 a French company had induced the colonial government to build two roads to the coast of Vietnam through the Mughia and Nape passes and was exporting 939 tons of tin per year (out of 1,602 tons for all of Indochina). However, the mine's 6,000 laborers and craftsmen were almost entirely Vietnamese and all the technicians were either Vietnamese or French. The Lao received no profit, training, or employment, and eventually would be left with nothing more than a large hole in a mountainside.[32]

Under most colonial systems the Europeans supervised the development of a large urban center which increased in size as the rural residents migrated to the cities and adapted to urban living. But in this area of Indochina, the French had so little interest in working with the native population that the Laotians became a minority in their own cities, and the cities remained inconsequential enclaves surrounded by an unchanging village society. The French populated the cities with Vietnamese merchants and traders to the point that in 1943 the capital, Vientiane, was 53 per cent Vietnamese (42 per cent Lao, 4 per cent Chinese); its second largest city, Thakhek, was 85 per cent Vietnamese (10 per cent Lao, 4 per cent Chinese); and its third largest city, Pakse, was 62 per cent Vietnamese (14 per

31. Joel Halpern, "The Role of the Chinese in Lao Society," *Laos Project* Paper #1, *op. cit.*, pp. 2–12.

32. Charles Robequain, *The Economic Development of French Indochina* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1944), p. 261.

cent Lao, 23 per cent Chinese).[33] The language of the cities was Vietnamese or French, and the Lao were even prevented from establishing a newspaper for fear that it might generate discontent. Much of the hostility of the present-day Lao elite and urban populace toward the Vietnamese stems from this colonial experience.

After 1898 the fiscal administration of Indochina was managed through a unified general budget. The cost of maintaining even Laos' small number of colonial officials on a European standard of living was so high that Laos had to be subsidized through the general budget. The colonial administration in Saigon never accepted the idea that any colony could be a net loss and maintained constant pressure on its officials in Vientiane to increase Laos' tax revenues. The officials in Vientiane responded by levying an increasingly heavy head tax on every male between the ages of 18 and 60, by demanding an average of 15 days of corvée labor a year (which could be redeemed by paying another head tax), and by extracting heavy fines for even minor legal offenses. This was not very successful, however, for the tax was so heavy that most Laotian village, district, and canton officials were willing to underreport the local population on the annual census (to the extent that French population estimates in some areas were 35 per cent too low.)[34] In 1900 direct taxation collected only 300,000 francs out of a total administrative budget of almost 2 million francs.[35]

The French tried to remedy this fiscal disaster by using the same method they had adopted in other parts of Indochina—the development of a government monopoly on the manufacture and sale of opium. While the French may have neglected the economic development of Laos, in the rest of Indochina from 1900 to 1925 they built a costly railway network, a complete highway system, schools, universities, and impressive colonial administrative centers. This was the period in which most of

33. Joel Halpern, "Population Statistics and Associated Data," *op. cit.*, Table #58.

34. Eric Piertrantoni, "La population du Laos de 1912 à 1945," *Bulletin de la Société des Etudes Indochinoises,* Vol. XXVII, #1 (1953), p. 27.

35. Reinach, *op. cit.*, p. 382.

Vietnam's economic infrastructure was developed, but it was also a time when French private and governmental capital showed little interest in colonial development. The colonial administration solved this problem by establishing a government opium monopoly in 1899 which had the sole right to grow, import, manufacture, and sell opium in Indochina. Through its 5,000 opium dens and shops the opium monopoly generated between 20 and 50 per cent of all of Indochina's revenues from 1898 to 1925 and was largely responsible for the economic development of the colony.[36] Although the monopoly's sale of opium in Laos produced only 150,000 francs in 1900, by 1904 it had increased to 350,000 francs, and its steady rise over the years solved most of Laos' fiscal problems.[37]

But the significance of opium for Laos soon went far beyond its own internal consumption and particular budgetary problems. Although most of the opium which the monopoly sold came from China, India, or Persia, the monopoly did promote the improvement of agricultural techniques among the Meo of Laos. Xieng Khouang province was given a monopoly on legally grown opium in Indochina.[38] To the French this seemed like an ideal solution of Laos' economic dilemma, for a small amount of opium could bring a high return and profits could be made despite poor transportation.

By legalizing and promoting the consumption of opium among the peoples of Indochina (it was illegal for a European to consume opium) and selling their opium at the highest possible price, the French also created a huge demand for less expensive opium and indirectly promoted an enormous smuggling trade. While only Xieng Khouang province participated in the legal opium trade, all of northern Laos grew opium for the contraband trade. The Chinese merchants who crossed Laos' loosely guarded borders with their opium-loaded mule trains from Burma and China were willing to supplement their profits by

36. Jacques Dumarest, *Les Monopolies de L'Opium et du Sel en Indochine*, Ph.D. Thesis (Université de Lyon, 1938), pp. 5–6.
37. Reinach, *op. cit.*, pp. 211, 385.
38. Dumarest, *op. cit.*, p. 20.

exchanging silver, cloth, and utensils for Laotian opium.[39] Although the French took vigorous action to suppress this trade on the Vietnam-China border in the late 1920s (thereby increasing the monopoly's sales ninefold in northern Vietnam), the French ignored Laos' long, difficult frontiers. Through this oversight the French made Laos into a smuggler's haven and started the contraband opium trade, which today is managed by the CIA and its airline, Air America.[40] (See also article 14, by Scott and article 15, by Feingold.)

Laotian Response to the French

While the French administration of the lowland Lao met with indirect resistance, it rarely encountered any direct, violent opposition. The French gained Lao compliance by taking advantage of the charisma of Lao kings and princes, by ruling through the effective Lao administrative hierarchy, and by defining all of their demands in terms of traditional Lao customs. The Lao had been administered by some form of centralized government for centuries and were used to accepting outside authority. In contrast, the French made harsher demands on the upland peoples and generally had little respect for their customs, leaders, and political traditions. There were a series of upland revolts beginning in 1896, reaching a peak between 1910 and 1916, and finally dying out in the late 1930s, all of which expressed resistance to almost every aspect of the French program.

In southern Laos the French administration of the highland tribes quickly provoked a massive rebellion which lasted for 35 years. The uprising was centered in the Bolovens Plateau and was led by the Alak tribe, who worked as weavers and merchants for the other Kha tribes of the region.[41] Although the revolt took the form of a messianic religious movement, the Alak and their allies (the most important of whom were the Loven, another Kha tribe) bitterly resented French attempts to collect

39. *Ibid.*, p. 136.
40. *Christian Science Monitor*, May 29, 1970.
41. Lebar, Hickey, and Musgrave, *op. cit.*, p. 135.

taxes and regulate their commerce. They were, essentially, fighting for political independence.

The revolt began in January 1901 when a group of Kha crossed the Mekong from Thailand into Saravane province, successfully avoided French troops trying to force them back into Thailand, and made contact with the Alak villages near Thateng on the northern edge of the Bolovens Plateau.[42] Under the leadership of the Loven tribesman Ong Keo the revolt spread so quickly that by April French Commissioner Remy was forced to try to repress it by attacking its base area at Thateng with only the weak Saravane garrison. The French force was heavily assaulted by over 1,500 armed Kha and escaped only after a bitter battle and heavy losses.[43]

Ong Keo was soon joined by the great Alak leader Komadom, and the rebellion gained such momentum that in June Remy wired from Saravane for reinforcements saying, "It is a general uprising, all the villages on the Plateau are deserted, the rebels have formed seven groups, stronger than 1,000 men each."[44]

In June the rebellion spread into Vietnam as Sedang rebels attacked the French garrison at Kontum. In April of 1902 it reached its peak when several thousand unarmed Laotians assaulted the provincial capital at Savannakhet and were gunned down by French troops, who killed over 150 Laotians.[45] The movement lost much of its strength soon thereafter, for the French built a series of blockhouses around the edge of the Plateau, burned most of the region's crops, moved villages out of the area, and drove the rebels off the Plateau and eastward into the mountains.[46]

In 1907 the French launched a major campaign to destroy the rebel stronghold and succeeded in forcing Ong Keo to surrender and swear his loyalty to France. But they failed to capture

42. M. Colonna, "Monographie de la Province de Saravane," *Bulletin des Amis du Laos* #2 (1938), Hanoi, p. 86.
43. Boulanger, *op. cit.*, p. 345.
44. Colonna, *op cit.*, p. 86.
45. Boulanger, *op. cit.*, p. 346.
46. André Fraisse, "Les Villages du Plateau des Bolovens," *Bulletin de la Société des Études Indochinoises* (1951), p. 58.

Komadom and his Alak followers, who escaped to the Phou Luong ridge on the northeast edge of the Bolovens Plateau. Ong Keo's submission was only temporary; he fled to Thailand, where he gained new support, and then returned to Laos. In 1910 through the leader of the royal house and governor of Champassak, Chao Nhouy, the French arranged for negotiations between Ong Keo and a French representative, Fendler. Knowing that the Kha would not touch his head when they checked for weapons, Fendler hid a pistol in his helmet, and when the bodyguards had backed away he shot Ong Keo.[47]

Komadom carried on a small resistance movement at Phou Luong until 1934 when he suddenly began to gain masses of new followers. The depression had affected the hill tribes severely because the relative value of the coffee and spices they sold declined sharply in relation to the cloth and iron they purchased.[48] Poverty and hunger swept the Plateau, and in their wake Komadom's movement gained new strength. In 1935 whole districts began abandoning their villages to join Komadom. The French responded in the spring of 1936 with a massive pacification campaign which climaxed in an attack on Phou Luong and the capture of Komadom's son, Si Thon. Four months later the movement ended when Komadom was shot by French militia as he was fleeing into Attopeu province.[49] However, the outcome of this rebellion still influences Laotian politics, for Komadom's son is now vice-chairman of the Pathet Lao for the southern hill peoples, and the son of the Champassak governor, Chao Nhouy, is a present-day right-wing leader, Prince Boun Oum.[50]

By their annexation of the Lu cantons Muong Ou (northern Phong Saly province) and Muong Sing (Nam Tha province) the French aroused a great deal of initial resentment, which passed when they granted these areas their autonomy immediately after the annexation. However, as the French began to

47. Wilfred Burchett, *Mekong Upstream* (Hanoi: Red River Publishing House, 1957), p. 242.
48. Izikowitz, *op. cit.*, p. 313.
49. Colonna, *op. cit.*, p. 87.
50. Pierre Gentil, *Remous du Mekong* (Paris, 1950), p. 119.

renege on these commitments and to assume the right to raise taxes, appoint officials, and station troops, hostilities arose which soon led to rebellion. As the French moved to assume greater authority in the Lu areas of Phong Saly province, they met with the opposition of Lu canton chief Va Na Poum. He became such an administrative bother that in 1908 the French commissioner sent troops to arrest him and send him to Vientiane for trial. Instead the Lu evicted the French from Muong Ou, tried to assassinate the commissioner, and sought to reestablish their independence. In 1910 the French dispatched counterinsurgency specialist Nollin (fresh from the 1907 campaign against Ong Keo) and some colonial troops to Muong Ou to reestablish their authority. Nollin attacked Muong Ou and succeeded in capturing Va Na Poum, who was killed in a skirmish a short time later when the Lu tried to set him free.[51]

In 1914, when the French representative in the Lu canton of Muong Sing encroached upon the authority of the canton chief, Phra Ong Kham, the Lu began to plot the assassination of the French official. The plot was discovered in December and Phra Ong Kham and his supporters retreated into the Sip Song Panna, raised an army, and returned to lead a rebellion. It was not until 1916, after the French had sent three large, costly military expeditions into Muong Sing, that Phra Ong Kham was finally defeated and driven back into the Sip Song Panna.[52]

From 1914 to 1916 the most violent of all the revolts against the French swept across northeastern Laos and northern Vietnam, temporarily removing whole provinces from French control. The revolt was the result of an alliance between Chinese opium merchants who were being harassed by the opium monopoly, and Tai from Vietnam's Sip Song Chau Tai who were angered at the excesses of the Deo family and French administration. The revolt began on November 11, 1914, when 40 Tai and 40 Chinese attacked the French garrison at the city of Sam Neua, slaughtered the colonial troops, and captured the city. A neighboring French garrison that tried to recapture the city

51. Ayme, *op. cit.*, pp. 113–114.
52. Boulanger, *op. cit.*, pp. 356–357.

was ambushed and repulsed, and it was not until December that regular troops from Vietnam were able to retake Sam Neua.[53]

The rebels retreated into Vietnam, and after launching unsuccessful attacks on the French garrisons at Son La and Dien Bien Phu, fell back into Phong Saly province in Laos. The French had administered Phong Saly as a special military district and their rule had been particularly harsh. The hill tribes were bitter because of the heavy demands made upon them for food, porters, and taxes. The Lu had recently finished their own revolt, and the southwest corner of the province was filled with Tai refugees who had fled from the harshness of the Deo-French rule in the Sip Song Chau Tai.[54] Forty rebels led by a Chinese mule driver captured Muong Ou without a shot. After the Lu drove off the French officials, the Tai joined the rebels willingly, and by February 1915 this rebel band had captured nearly the whole province.

In March 1915 the French sent two companies of troops into Phong Saly to deal with the rebels. Several months later, after suffering a series of inconsequential victories and partial losses, they withdrew.[55] By December 1915 the French realized that their continued possession of the province was in question. They mustered two regular colonial army regiments from Hanoi comprising over 5,000 troops, 1,600 pack mules, and several batteries of mountain artillery. After two months of heavy fighting this expedition managed to restore French control by driving the rebels into China.[56]

In Xieng Khouang province the French presence had made Lao dominance over the Meo unbearable. In 1919 the Meo unleashed a bloody revolt. One colonial officer explained its causes this way:

> One day the warlike temper of the Meo revived itself and there were good reasons for that; crushing taxes, heavy tithes on the opium;

53. Boutin, *op. cit.*, p. 73.
54. Commander Deporte, "Les Origines de la Famille de Deo Van Tri," *Bulletin des Amis du Laos* #4 (Hanoi, 1940).
55. Ayme, *op. cit.*, p. 116.
56. *Ibid.*, p. 121.

requisitioned horses which were not paid for. And always these lower officials and petty chiefs brandished before the Meo the scarecrow of the French bogeyman. One day, despite the scarecrow, the coup came and the revolt struck.[57]

The revolt began among the Vietnamese Meo in July 1919. It spread to Laos when a fleeing rebel Meo from Vietnam, Batchay, took refuge in Xieng Khouang province and called upon the Meo to establish an independent kingdom with its capital at Dien Bien Phu. The tough Meo began a devastating assault on all Lao, Tai, and French installations in the province and created a genuine crisis for the colonial government. The local garrisons sent in to quash the revolt had been ambushed and defeated by September, and so regular troops from Saigon and Hanoi had to be dispatched. These troops launched a systematic "pacification" program—moving villages, burning crops, and incarcerating the Meo population—with such success that by March of 1921 Batchay had lost most of his support. He was finally betrayed to the French and killed.[58]

All of these revolts ultimately failed because they were scattered, isolated events which usually involved only one segment or one region of the mountain populations. They remained fractional minority revolts which in most cases failed to get the support of other minorities, or more important, the support of the Lao plurality. These revolts would remain the localized outbursts of countless racial and regional splinters until some larger movement could unify their dissidence and harness it to a higher cause. Unwittingly it was the French who supplied this cause, and they did it with the "Lao Movement."

The Great Awakening, 1940–1945

With the rise of Thailand's "Pan-Thai" movement and the apparent willingness of the Japanese to sacrifice French Laos to the expansionist aims of its Bangkok ally, the Vichy French realized that they would have to make some effort to reinforce

57. Henri Roux, "Les Meo or Miao Tseu," *France Asie* #92–93 (January–February, 1954), p. 404.
58. Boulanger, *op. cit.*, pp. 358–360.

their position. In January 1941 the Thai gave vent to their growing militance by attacking several French naval vessels in the Gulf of Siam. Although the military outcome was not clear, the Japanese imposed an armistice (concluded in Tokyo, January 31, 1941) which forced France to cede all Laotian territories west of the Mekong (Sayaboury and Champassak provinces). This created a political crisis for the French two days later when, meeting with the French governor of Laos and Crown Prince Savang Vatthana, Governor General Admiral Decoux learned that King Sisavang Vong was considering his resignation. This would have been a major blow, for without the Lao royal presence to bolster the declining French position, the loss of Laos to Thailand was a distinct possibility.

Decoux visited Laos the following month, met with the king, and offered him a number of concessions to assuage his grief at the loss of two productive provinces. Decoux agreed to guarantee the existence of the kingdom of Luang Prabang with a treaty of protectorate, to add three more provinces (Nam Tha, Xieng Khouang, and Vientiane) to the three provinces which then constituted the kingdom, and to give Laos a certain amount of political autonomy.[59]

Since what Decoux really offered the king was a tiny separate budget, an advisory legislature, and three powerless cabinet positions, something more was needed to save Laos for France.[60] To parry the thrust of Pan-Thai nationalism across the Mekong, Decoux sought to use as a counterthrust something the French had stifled in the Lao for over 45 years—Lao nationalism.

> This [Lao national] movement was responding to a pressing necessity. An intense and dangerous Thai propaganda was developing along the Mekong River against us, and the question was posed whether our Laotian protégés, troubled and touched by the defeat of France, might yield to the solicitations of Bangkok, and turn their regard to their brothers of the Thai-Lao race, or on the contrary remain loyal to us, and constitute an unmoveable rock under the shadow of our pavilion. . . . The Lao propaganda, addressed itself in reality to all the Laotians,

59. Admiral Decoux, *A la Barre de L'Indochine* (Paris, 1949), pp. 292–297.
60. Katay Don Sasorith, *Le Laos* (Paris, 1953), p. 55.

the Siamese as well as the French, and developed, in all forms, the exalted theme of the "great Lao homeland" which will one day group all of the children, temporarily separated, of this vast family under the folds of the French flag.[61]

Decoux felt that if the national movement were correctly managed, it would make the Lao eager for modernization and for the return of the west bank territories, both of which occupied Vichy France was now too weak to guarantee.

Decoux chose Charles Rochet as the midwife of the Lao movement. Rochet was a colonial official who had come to Laos six years before, developed a deep affection for the Lao, and become embittered at the French for their neglect of the country. Under Rochet the Lao movement tried to arouse national sentiment among the younger Lao elite through a cultural renaissance of Lao literature, music, and dance, creation of a national development program, and participation in patriotic gestures such as marches and mass rallies.[62] The movement's leaders met weekly at Rochet's home in Vientiane, where they mapped out new strategies for generating ethnic pride among the lowland Lao. The movement's solid accomplishments included the construction of over 7,000 schools (more than had been built in the previous 47 years), significant expansion of a declining health system, and publication of the first Laotian newspaper. Rochet himself looked at the movement as a last desperate attempt to save Laos from extinction. In making this effort he aroused the hostility of the more conservative colonial officials, who rightly claimed that Rochet was arousing dangerous sentiments.[63] Whatever the French may have thought of him, Rochet aroused emotions in the young Laotian elite which they had never been allowed to express. As one Lao diplomat explained in his 1960 memoirs,

> No Lao teachers, students, or farmers, will ever forget the name Charles Rochet. We cannot ever forget this man who was very different from other French. We will never forget that in 1945 . . . every

61. Decoux, *op. cit.*, p. 409.
62. *Ibid.*
63. Rochet, *op. cit.*, p. 41.

> student had to get up early in the morning, salute the flag, and do drilling exercises. And every Sunday we went to the Lao Association Lawn to drill. We also sang songs, Boy Scout songs, and other songs—songs that would not let us Lao forget that Laos still exists in the world. . . . M. Rochet gave a start to the young Lao who are now helping their country. He also gave birth to Lao dramatic plays, the Lao Club, and the *Lao Yai* bulletin which has made the Lao feel gratitude and appreciation toward him more than any other European except M. Pavie. . . . We will never forget that we used to wear our blue shirts and our white shorts with a Lao emblem on our pockets, which is the symbol of the Young Lao. We were well disciplined, which gave us the feeling that Lao can rule themselves rather than the French or Vietnamese and also we speak the same language.[64]

For decades the French had succeeded in making the Lao elite think of themselves as the children of France, but with even this slight taste of the heady wine of ethnic pride a whole generation of the elite was lost to France. Forces of racial and national pride were aroused which could no longer be denied and which would make it impossible for the French to maintain their position in Laos.

However, while the highland peoples were ignored by the Lao movement, other forces of change swept through the hills of northern Laos. Two of these—opium trade and guerrilla warfare—were to have equally serious consequences for the future of Laos.

After the fall of France in 1940 and the establishment of the French Vichy government by the Nazis, Indochina came under greater and greater Japanese control. By the time of the Japanese attack on Pearl Harbor, the French and Japanese had established a joint administration and Indochina had become a base both for Japanese attacks against Chiang Kai-shek's forces in southwestern China and the Japanese advance into Indonesia. While this arrangement satisfied most French colonial officials, it caused enormous problems for those who had to manage the opium monopoly. Indochina was now cut off from its major

64. Anonymous, "Smiles and Tears," quoted in Joel Halpern, *Government, Politics and Social Structure in Laos*, SEAS Yale University Monograph Series #4 (New Haven, 1964), pp. 149–150.

opium sources in southwest China, the Middle East, and Burma. Indochina would face an incredible social crisis if it had to deal with the massive withdrawal problems of several hundred thousand addicts, and it would face a fiscal crisis if it were deprived of this important source of revenue.

The solution to the problem was found in northern Laos. Previously the French had bought some opium from the Meo of Xieng Khouang province but had generally allowed most of the opium in northern Laos to become contraband rather than undertake the enormous military costs involved in suppressing the illegal trade. Now rather than ending the contraband trade, the French tried to take it over. French officials scoured every ridge and mountain top in northern Laos for poppy fields, offered the Meo, Yao, and Tai tribes fantastic prices for their produce in an attempt to outbid the smugglers, and even supplied seeds and instruction to tribes and villages who had not previously grown opium. Since these tribes prized the silver which the French offered in exchange as jewelry for their women and as a mobile form of savings, they began to neglect their food crops for the poppy fields to such an extent that malnutrition and even starvation began to plague the opium growers.[65] The French-induced bonanza also initiated serious conflict in the previously harmonious mountain villages as clans and families fought with each other for the enormous rewards of this lucrative trade.

In late 1944 and early 1945, as the Free French prepared for the liberation of Indochina, they set up guerrilla bases in the wild mountain terrain of the Indochinese uplands. When French forces in Calcutta planned their operations for Laos, they realized that European commandos would be easily detected by the Japanese and that the lowland Lao were ill-suited to the difficult highland life.[66] Thus, as the French organized their guerrilla forces and began parachute drops of supplies and commandos in late 1944, they sought out the hill tribes, the only people

65. Rochet, *op. cit.*, pp. 106–108.
66. Michel Caply, *Guérilla au Laos* (Paris: Presses de la Cité, 1966), p. 56.

who could make effective mountain guerrillas. Thus, tribes who had been at odds with each other for a half century because of the French cross-racial administration, and clans or families who had been fighting each other for the opium rewards, were now armed and organized with modern military weapons. The resulting conflict produced permanent cleavages in Laotian society which are still being worked out today.

How opium and armaments promoted major divisions among the mountain peoples can be seen most clearly by using the example of the Meo of Xieng Khouang province. In the current Laotian conflict the Pathet Lao vice-chairman for the northern hill peoples is the Meo leader Faydang, a member of the Lo clan from Nong Het village in Xieng Khouang province. The political leader of the Meo in General Vang Pao's CIA army is the Meo leader Touby Ly Fong, a member of the Ly clan from Nong Het village.[67] As a part of their program to prevent a repetition of the 1919–1921 Meo uprising, the French had established an independent Meo district *(tasseng)* with its headquarters near the Plain of Jars at Nong Het. The district leader was a Meo whose appointment was approved by the French. It was his duty to deliver the Meo opium quota to the Lao canton chief at Ban Ban (usually the canton chief was a member of the Xieng Khouang royal family) who in turn delivered it to the French provincial commissioner at Xieng Khouang City.[68] By the late 1930s power at Nong Het was shared between the wealthier, more established Lo clan (Faydang's), which was allied with the Luang Prabang royal family, and the rising Ly clan (Touby's), which was allied with the French and the Xieng Khouang royal family.

The alliance between the Lo and the Ly clans broke up when the daughter of the leader of the Lo clan who had married Touby's father (Ly) died after complaining several times about being mistreated. After the split, Prince Phetsarath (a member of the Luang Prabang royal family and later leader of the Lao Issara, a forerunner of the Pathet Lao) asked the

67. Dumarest, *op. cit.*, p. 61; Savina, *op. cit.*, pp. 237–239.
68. Archaimbault, *op. cit.*, p. 660.

French to give the important position of district leader to the Lo clan, and Faydang's father was given the appointment.[69]

However, with the Japanese occupation and the increased demand for opium, the French wanted a close ally at the vital Nong Het opium center. Faydang's father was removed from the position of district leader, and a member of the French-educated Ly clan (Touby's) was appointed.[70] As the French began to study their reoccupation of Laos in late 1944, they realized the paramount strategic importance of the Plain of Jars. On March 4, 1945, they parachuted commandos and supplies into a secret camp which had been established for them by Touby Ly Fong and his Meo followers.[71] When the French liberation of Laos turned into a campaign of recolonization aimed at destroying the Lao Issara, it was only natural that Faydang would join with Phetsarath and the Lao Issara. Although Faydang's alliance with Phetsarath's more conservative Lao Issara was based as much on these factional splits as it was on his dislike of the French, his subsequent alliance with Souphanouvong's Pathet Lao was made on a much more sophisticated ideological basis. Nonetheless, a simple clan conflict, which in traditional Meo society would have been resolved by splitting the village and separating the clans, has become instead a permanent cleavage which has helped to fuel 25 years of civil war.

In April 1945 the Japanese terminated fifty years of French colonialism by having King Sisavang Vong declare Laos independent. But by manipulating racial and regional factions, the French managed to return to power after Japan's surrender. However, the movement which had developed through Laos' wartime experience created nationalists who refused to return to colonial status. Some eventually allied with the traditional dissidents of the upland tribes to create a strong national revolutionary movement—the Pathet Lao.

69. *Ibid.*
70. G. Linwood Barney, "The Meo of Xieng Khouang Province, Laos," in Peter Kunstader, ed., *Southeast Asian Tribes, Minorities, and Nations* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1967), pp. 273–275.
71. Caply, *op. cit.*, pp. 58, 82.

