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Laos and Her Tribal Problems

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A NOTE ON HENRY GREEN IN RETIREMENT

BRUCE M. JOHNSON

THE ALUMNI ASSOCIATION OF THE UNIVERSITY OF MICHIGAN

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LAOS AND HER TRIBAL PROBLEMS

BY JOEL M. HALPERN

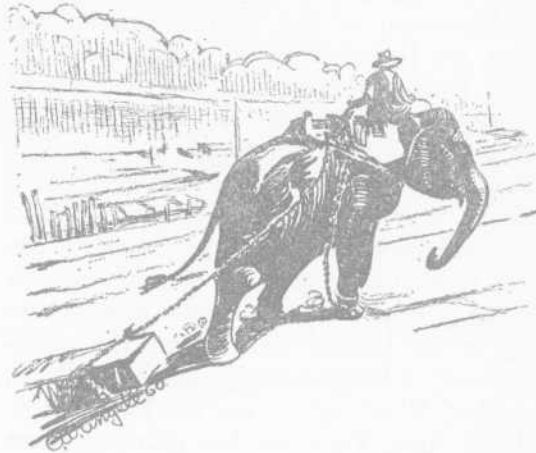
JUST as the novelist uses artistic license to shape reality in order to present a particular point of view more dramatically, so we have in contemporary society certain situations which, by their uniqueness, may help to give broader understanding of significant world-wide problems.

Laos offers this possibility. The conditions of countries heretofore colonial and economically backward are exaggerated, but this very exaggeration can offer new viewpoints, because here, in the little Kingdom of a Million Elephants and the White Parasol, the problems of newly emerging nations are brought clearly into focus.

CERTAINLY the situation existing in Laos today is not found, at least not to the same degree, in any other area of the world. The Kingdom of Laos, landlocked in the heart of Southeast Asia, is about the size of the state of Oregon. The population is estimated to be about two million. There are no railroads. The number of roads linking the administrative capital of Vientiane to the provincial towns is extremely limited, and most of them are impassable during the rainy season. There are no telephone connections between the towns of Laos (al-

though radio and telegraph contacts do exist).

This country has probably the smallest number of college-educated people of any sovereign nation. There has until very recently been only one fully trained doctor, only one pharmacist, two fully qualified engineers and less than half a dozen men with any training in law. Most of the



ELEPHANT HAULING LOGS UP MEKONG EMBANKMENT

cabinet ministers have had the equivalent of a United States junior-high-school education. This holds true not only for the present generation of Lao government officials, that is, men in their forties or fifties, but also for the younger people, in their early twenties, who now hold government positions. Few of the young Lao sent to study in French universities have been willing or able to complete their courses and obtain degrees. There are at present less than half a dozen Lao students in the United States, although increasing numbers are being sent abroad for one or two years of technical training.

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Approximately half the population of Laos is ethnically non-Lao, composed of tribal peoples speaking languages mutually unintelligible to the Lao. It is estimated that less than 10 per cent of the total population of the kingdom lives in urban centers. Of this 10 per cent at least half again are non-Lao, and include mostly Chinese merchants, Vietnamese craftsmen, some French businessmen, Indian and Pakistani cloth sellers, and various types of American and European officials.

ISOLATED from world trade routes, and for decades an unknown corner of French Indochina, in and after World War II Laos experienced in turn Japanese invasion, occupation by Chinese troops, re-establishment of the French colonial regime, the Indochinese War, and independence. During the days of French colonial administration Laos was regarded as a kind of Shangri-La and an exotic retreat. The events of World War II and the Indochinese War do not appear to have affected the fundamental cultural patterns of Laos. Her sudden emergence, five years ago, as an independent nation resulted in membership in the United Nations and the establishment of Royal Lao Embassies in Paris, London, Washington, and the major capitals of Asia. Vientiane has changed from a tranquil provincial town to a national capital, with ministries, a national assembly, traffic jams, night clubs, and air-conditioned movies.

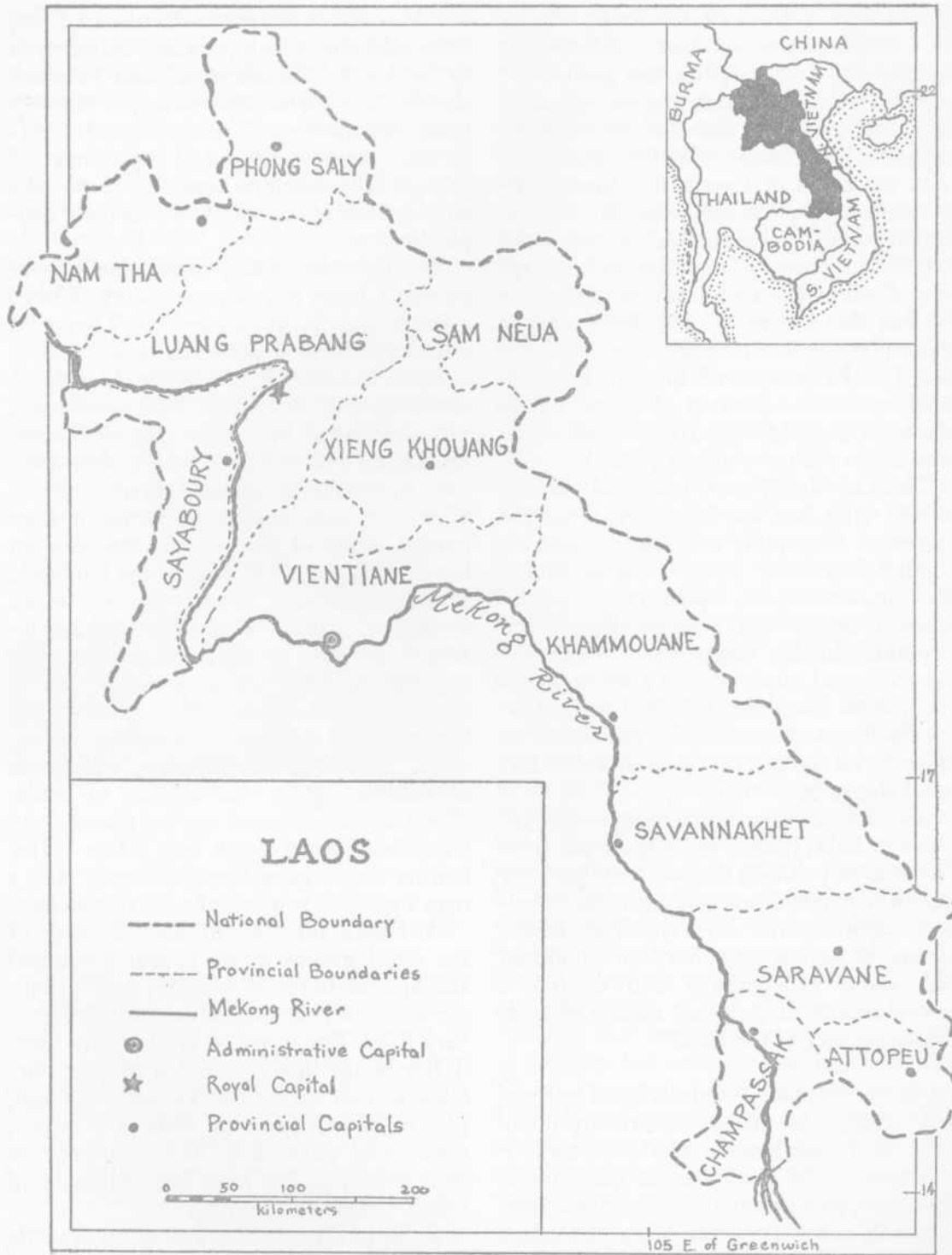
Since 1954 the United States government has taken over from France the basic economic responsibility for Laos. Much important French influence remains, however. There is a question in the minds of many as to whether Laos really constitutes an independent political entity. Over the past five years the United States has spent approximately two hundred million dollars in Laos and has been actively concerned with her political and economic affairs. The following American governmental organi-

zations operate in Laos: the Embassy, Information Service, aid program (United States Operations Mission [USOM]), and a Program Evaluation Office (the military advisory group).

SINCE they constitute about 50 per cent of the population, the Lao are the dominant group in the kingdom, politically, socially, and culturally. They are valley-dwelling Buddhist farmers who derive their main livelihood from raising rice in irrigated fields. Related historically and culturally to the people of Thailand, their way of life is almost indistinguishable from that of the inhabitants of Northeast Thailand, who are also known as Lao, and with whom they share a common language closely related to Thai. There is, indeed, some question as to whether Laos would today be an independent state if certain minor kingdoms and provinces of Thailand had not been annexed and combined by the French in the process of acquiring Indochina less than a century ago.

There are certain provinces, such as Nam Tha in the north and Attapeu in the south, where the overwhelming majority of the inhabitants are non-Lao. In the Lao government's attempt to minimize the distinctiveness of the various tribal groups and bring them together as citizens of Laos, they have set up a classification of ethnic minorities based on settlement patterns: the Lao-Tai or lowland tribal Tai, the Lao-Teng or upland Lao, and the Lao-Som or Lao of the mountaintops. (In this classification the Lao refer to themselves as Lao-Lum, or valley Lao.) The system has not yet found general acceptance within Laos, although it is significant in that it implies a conscious effort on the part of the official elite to emphasize the unity of the country. Many tribal groups, related to those in Laos, live in neighboring North and South Vietnam and Northeast Thailand, and others are found in Burma.

The Lao-Tai includes tribal Tai groups



LAOS: ITS PROVINCES AND NEIGHBORS

such as the Tai Dam (Black Tai) and does not comprise the dominant valley Lao themselves; however, the two groups are related in ethnic origins and in language. Like the Lao, the Lao-Tai traditionally had petty kingdoms. Today they live mainly in the north of Laos and cultivate irrigated rice. They differ from the Lao in certain animistic beliefs and in the social structure of their communities, but perhaps one of the most significant differences is the fact that the valley Lao make a sharp distinction between themselves and the Lao-Tai. Reflections of this are the proportionate lack of access of tribal Tai to education and their relatively small numbers in central government posts.

The Lao-Teng, more commonly known as Kha (the Lao word for slave), are the largest of the ethnic minorities. They are divided into many groups such as Khmu, Kha Ko, and others, with varying customs and economies, some even speaking mutually unintelligible languages. The Kha are the aboriginal inhabitants of Laos and generally rank lowest in the social scale. Living chiefly on mountainsides, they cultivate upland rice in patches cleared from forested slopes by burning.

The Lao-Som are the most recent arrivals in Laos, having migrated south from China largely during the past century. They live in northern Laos and are more familiarly known as the Meo and Yao. In the raising of opium they have an important cash crop. Independent and aggressive mountaineers, they do not readily concede the superiority of the Lao.

AMONG the many problems faced by these groups, as they seek a readjustment from their traditionally inferior status with reference to the Lao, are the questions of education, participation in the national government, and sharing the fruits of modern Western technology, to which they have all been exposed in varying degrees. How then is this situation reconcilable with the terms

one often hears about the peoples of Laos, especially the tribal peoples—terms such as “isolated,” “indifferent,” and “twelfth century”? A partial answer is that they are today simultaneously isolated and indifferent, discontented, and conscious of change. This becomes apparent if we take a closer look at the way in which these people live.

Flying over Laos, particularly over northern Laos, one can spot many isolated villages high in the mountains. They consist of a settlement of two or three to about a dozen houses. Occasionally only a single dwelling will be noted. The settlements are surrounded by fields—gaping patches of charred mountainside where slash-and-burn cultivation is practiced. Here is clearly a case of isolation, for in northern Laos market towns of any size are few and far between. But a closer look at the landscape reveals circuitous lines winding down through the forest. These are rough mountain trails, some so steep and slippery that not even hardy mountain ponies can negotiate them. Many are impassable during the monsoon season. Despite their limitations, however, these trails are real means of communication and arteries of trade. Their winding courses can be traced from tribal settlements down into a Lao valley market town, even though it may take a man a week or two to make the trip on foot.

Although the way of life of many of the tribal groups might appear aboriginal and Spartan to the Westerner, these groups are absolutely dependent on trade for their very lives. The trails are vital supply lines. A few of the items the tribal peoples purchase include salt, metal knives, and cloth, plus occasional luxuries, such as kerosene, sugar, and guns. The Meo manufacture their own guns but must buy sulphur and nitrate to make gunpowder.

Even in the small towns there are side effects of trade, for it is here that the tribal man first comes into contact with government officials, airplanes, automobiles (if

only jeeps), and possibly movies, clinics, and schools. He also is introduced to many consumer items, such as radios and pressure lamps, which he desires and cannot afford. We have, then, isolation and dissatisfaction—isolation in a sense that his appearance in the trading center is infrequent, and dissatisfaction in being confronted with all kinds of new goods and services of which he can take advantage to only a limited extent.

IT WOULD be easy to say that the dominant Lao have exploited the tribal peoples, the Communists have cultivated them, and American policy has ignored them. There are elements of truth in this, but the



A LAO VILLAGE STORE

actual situation is considerably more complex.

Imagine a scene at a small market town in the north. There are Meo, with their heavy silver neck rings, Khmu decked in towel turbans, Yao women in intricately embroidered trousers, and Kha Ko in beads and indigo leggings. By merely sitting around at the morning market it is possible to see many types of social contact among ethnic groups. Lao women of the town come to bargain with the tribal men and women who have made the long trip down from their mountain homes to sell a few potatoes or betel leaves. In these small ex-

changes the tribal people are usually paid in cash. They receive some paper bills with which they are unfamiliar. They are not sure if they have received the correct amount for their product, but their protests and doubts subside into passive resignation.

Across the way one may see a group of Khmu men, women, and children hard at work breaking rock for a road. They have come down to work for a few weeks during the dry season, in order to earn enough to buy a supply of salt, a few metal implements, and perhaps some clothing. Then they will return to their upland villages. They are usually unable to speak more than a few words of Lao. This, however, does not prevent them from forming ideas about life in the town. These ideas do not include any feeling of their own participation in the government. If, for example, a tribesman is accused of a crime and is brought to court, proceedings are always conducted in Lao. Only rarely are interpreters provided.

Yet many tribal people do bring back to their mountain villages images of all the material goods and wonderful things they have seen. Unable to achieve satisfaction through rational means, such as trading or the fruits of their own labor, it is not surprising that they, like many other peoples in similar situations, resort to magical means. Sometimes this takes the form of a legend concerning a prophet who will launch them into a new way of life. For the past few years, in the province of Luang Prabang and neighboring areas, the myth of *Djiung* has been circulating from one Khmu mountain village to another. *Djiung*, so the story goes, is the white king of the Khmu who lives in a vast cave located somewhere in the north. At present, believers are told, he is not strong enough to leave the cave, but if all the Khmu will cease their work, sacrifice their livestock, and feast as a sign of respect, he will come to them. Some Khmu say they have actu-

ally seen the cave, where Djiung presides over a weird empire of mounds of rice, piles of clothing, rows of jeeps, airplanes, medicines, blankets, and guns, all waiting to be distributed to his people. They need only have patience and await his coming. Often Djiung's appearance is predicted at a critical time in the planting season, and some Khmu have been in very real danger of starving to death. The Lao officials have dealt with this by arresting the propagators of the myth and forcing the others to resume work in the fields.

Much has been written about the so-called underdeveloped peoples of the world being interested only in filling their bellies and learning how to raise better crops rather than in the more abstruse concepts of government; in this context it is interesting to mention still another legend. The attempt at its propagation occurred in the summer of 1959, in a Meo settlement only sixty kilometers from Vientiane. Near this particular Meo village is a country inn frequented by high Lao government officials, so that the tribal people are in contact with Lao officials more often than is usual. A Meo villager went to work for some missionaries near the capital and returned to the village, about six months later, with the proclamation that Jesus Christ, eighteen feet tall, riding in a jeep and dressed as an American, would shortly appear in the village. Unlike Djiung, he would not distribute gifts but would lead the Meo to the Promised Land, that is, to Vientiane, where they would take over control of the country from the Lao. The spokesman was well received by many of his fellow villagers, and he instructed them to depose the local government-appointed officials. The officials informed the police, and the man was jailed.

IT IS TEMPTING to make the Lao and their political leaders the villains of the situation, but before following this easy path let us take a closer look. It is true that the

tribal people are often cheated in the market place and exploited as *corvée* labor (though this practice has been officially forbidden), but it is also true that there are long-standing reciprocal trading relationships which have existed between Lao farmers and different mountain tribes. Lao villagers speaking tribal languages have often acted as intermediaries between the tribal people and the Lao government. During the time of the French, when head taxes were imposed, these *lam* (interpreters) paid the taxes for their tribal associates; in return, the *lam* received forest products such as bamboo, betel, and wild game, plus the labor of the mountain people.



PAGODA IN A PROSPEROUS LAO VILLAGE

There have also been important ritual relationships. After more than a thousand years of Buddhism, belief in various animistic spirits continues to coexist with more formal religious practices among the Lao. Almost the entire population of Laos believes in these spirits, or *phi*. The mountain peoples, having lived in the country longer, are felt to be more intimately acquainted with them. Thus, on certain occasions the Lao have invited the Khmu, for example, to participate with them in buffalo sacrifices. When the French built the royal palace in Luang Prabang at the turn of the century,

the first person to enter was a Khmu chief-tain who made peace with the resident *phi*.

The Lao are not aggressive, and their errors in dealing with tribal peoples have been largely those of omission. They have failed to provide schools, health services, and roads, but then it is true that many of the valley Lao also lack these services. The Lao attitude, as expressed by many officials, is that Laos is a small country, and the only way for all the inhabitants to survive is to have the tribal peoples become Laotianized. Therefore no local languages are used in schools or government courts. A country only recently emerged into nationhood in the modern world cannot be expected to have much perspective on these matters, or perhaps even to realize their profound political implications. This is not to excuse the Lao, but both their leaders and their trained human resources are extremely limited.

The government maintains that the tribal people have the same voting privileges as the Lao. However, aside from one French-educated Meo family long associated with the Lao, which has two members in the National Assembly, the only other tribal representative is a Kha, who is a member of the Communist Pathet Lao. The tribal people hold few offices on the district level, and have only a few junior officers in the army. The Lao government's only real gesture of recognition of non-Lao languages has been through a recently inaugurated Lao Information Service project, a daily ten-minute news broadcast in Meo and in one of the Kha dialects.

WHAT is the American attitude toward this situation? Many of the American technicians stationed in Laos are sincere and conscientious. They are engaged in a multitude of projects, the aims of which are to better the living conditions of the peoples of Laos and to further the economic development of the country. The programs, ambitious in scope, range from road construction to public-health nursing and tech-

nical education. Potential programs which are not purely technical or political in the strict sense of the word are usually sidetracked or ignored. There seems to be a lack of desire to cope with broad cultural and political problems, such as the relationships between the Lao and the mountain peoples.

There are a few partial exceptions, the most significant of which is the work of the United States Information Service, which has produced a film on the minority which tries to emphasize the unity of the country. It has a Lao sound track. Some of the minority groups have also been featured in various Lao language publications and posters which are distributed throughout the kingdom. The net effect of this propaganda is difficult to assess, since reliable public opinion surveys do not exist.

The work of the International Voluntary Services, which has set up an agricultural training center in the Meo area of the province of Xieng Khouang, and that of Operation Brotherhood, the Philippine medical teams working in both Lao and tribal areas, should also be noted. Both these projects are supported by United States aid funds, but neither pretends to be a comprehensive approach to the problem. Nor is there any American official among the dozens of planners and coordinators whose job is primarily concerned with the question of the tribal peoples. No information appears to exist on even the number of tribal groups, to say nothing of their general economies and value systems.

A number of resident Americans working with rural problems have adopted the Lao attitude of assimilation as the only solution. This might be a possible answer, if infinite time were involved and if Laos did not have neighbors bent on destroying her social and political system. But even the policy of assimilation is at most an implicit one; to the best of my knowledge, the Lao government has no explicit policy with regard to her minority groups. Government

officials, in effect, still practice discrimination, as, for example, in the allocation of funds for schools and other projects.

IN THE past year many thousands of tribal Tai, Kha, and Meo refugees have entered Laos from North Vietnam and China, fleeing the communes and other harsh measures of the Communists. However, the fact that autonomous tribal areas have been set up by the Communists in the regions bordering Laos is not without significance. There these groups have their own administration, in the sense that Communist directives are carried out by local people. They also have schools in their own language. National autonomous areas are, of course, nothing new, and these appear to be modeled on the Soviet practice, but with local innovations. It should be emphasized that, according to official Lao news dispatches, many of the troops which fought the Royal Lao Army in 1959 were composed of Black Tai and Meo. The matter was brought to the attention of the United Nations, but because of ethnic similarities on both sides of the border it was difficult to prove that the North Vietnamese were the aggressors. At the same time, the Black Tai and Meo who live in Laos, although they may fear the Communists, do not appear to wish to fight on the side of the Royal Lao government.

It would be a distortion of facts to say that the tribal peoples are against the Lao government. Nearer the truth would be to state that, although only few are in sympathy with the Communists, those who will positively support the Lao government are also few. Many Lao officials are seriously concerned, but so far no coordinated efforts appear to have been made in this direction. One proposal, heard with increasing frequency in various agencies of the Lao government, is that of resettlement of the tribal peoples in the valleys. In the lowland areas, so the argument goes, they will be more closely linked with the government

and they will also be able to farm more productively without destroying the forests. Some upland communities have begun to move down, with a limited amount of government aid and, in rare cases, entirely on their own. The Lao government, however, lacks the resources to undertake resettlement programs on a national scale, and American planners do not appear to view the situation as one meriting their attention and funds. There have been no scientific investigations of those who have moved down and the types of problems they have faced.

There is no question but that resettlement can offer an attractive possibility to many tribal people. The attitude of the sole Yao working in the Lao government's Civic Action program, an intensive rural development project, is interesting in this connection. He is a young man of twenty, with approximately six years of schooling in a small market town in northern Laos. His goal in life is to save from his government service enough money to return to his village and resettle his entire patrilineal family in a nearby valley. He cited as advantages access to a school, a clinic, better farming conditions, and the opinion that it is more civilized to live in a valley.

RESETTLEMENT is not the only answer to improving relations between the Lao and minority groups, but it is a possibility which deserves exploration. Other possible approaches include the use of minority languages in the first few years of primary school. The use of interpreters in courts might be another step. The allocation of educational and health facilities to the mountain people on an equitable basis would also be desirable.

An increasing sophistication in the use of techniques of information and propaganda would also help. The author was present at a lecture given by a Civic Action worker to a group of Kha Ko tribesmen in Muong Sing in Nam Tha Province. These village headmen, averaging between thirty and

fifty years of age, had been summoned to the district town for a week-long indoctrination course. The course was administered in the following way. The headmen were seated in a semicircle around the desk of the Lao official, who read to them from a mimeographed form. They listened obediently. The document was read in Lao and translated by a second man into the Tai Lu language. A third person then retranslated it from Tai Lu to Kha Ko. When I asked some of the Kha Ko headmen what they thought of having schools in their village, having just received the lecture on the values of education, they replied that the *phi* would not permit it and that learning to write Lao would be showing disrespect for their ancestors. This attitude is widespread throughout the whole of Laos. The junior Lao official, a young man in his late teens, was carrying out his work in a very formal and authoritarian manner, and the net result of his effects appeared to be negligible. It is hard to see how such procedures can be effective in uniting the country and in giving the mountain people a sense of participation in the national life.

Informally, certain Lao deputies in the National Assembly have dealt with the

problem of minorities in their own peculiarly paternalistic way. They have gone out into minority villages showing movies, talking to the people, and occasionally distributing gifts of clothing and medicine. In one instance, a deputy brought several Yao headmen down to Vientiane and had one of his assistants show them around the capital. Although well-intentioned, these methods are hardly to be considered serious solutions to the question.

The United States has sent to Laos experts in fields as diverse as pig breeding and malaria control. Is it not possible to have people with the knowledge of minority problems investigate the situation jointly with the Lao and make positive suggestions?

Of course it is not possible for the American government to lay down absolute policies and expect the Lao government to follow them. But as a chief supplier of aid, we obviously have a position of great influence which might be used to the mutual benefit of both the Lao and the Americans and, one would hope, eventually enable the Lao to administer their own affairs more effectively. At this time the prospects seem dim but not impossible.

SWAMP EDGE

The cedar is dead and down—
Even cedar dies.
Yet indomitable from its dust
Three young cedars rise.

STELLA BRUNT OSBORN

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