

Comments on Educational Policies for the Hmong People of Laos

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Comments on Educational Policies for the Strong People of Laos

The traditional Strong community is particularly marked by the absence, or nearly complete absence, of any kind of schooling, which explains why the level of education is extremely low. We estimate that an illiteracy rate of more than 99% still exists in certain mountainous regions of Laos today.

Historically, modern civilization was born and developed in the plains, along the Mekong, and around the cities where there was economic exchange. The hinterland remains apart, isolated by the mountains, by forests, by the bad condition of the roads which are impassable for six months during the rainy season, by the dispersion of the population, and finally by the language. To these cultural-geographic difficulties which characterize the country we can add a political factor. In order "to avoid a possible expansion in Laos" the French administration had practiced, during their period of domination, a political philosophy which tended to "create an aristocracy among the people".<sup>1/</sup> It is, no doubt, for the same reason that the leaders of independent Laos have, for a long time, hesitated to construct schools in the mountains, hoping also to keep the minorities in an intellectual inferiority.<sup>2/</sup> Now, in our opinion, the formation of a real nation implies a community of thought and of will which cannot exist if the social or ethnic groups are left behind during the course of progress.

However, we should not rush to conclusions concerning the great number of people in Asia who do not know how to read or write. Intellectual development, even in the strictest sense of the term, has no connection with the degree of book learning, and the knowledge called "bookish" itself only implies the knowledge of writing and reading.

<sup>1/</sup> Barthelemy, Note on administrative decentralization and ethnic groups in Laos, in Exposition Coloniale Nationale, Marseille, 1922.

<sup>2/</sup> See an article by Phitmanaha Panyanouvong: "Qui forment les Lao?", in the monthly Bulletin of the Association of Lao Students in France, Page 32, Paris, February, 1971.

We have often witnessed in the border regions of North Laos that the illiterate Hmong speak four or five languages fluently; it is more difficult for them to do this when they have learned to read. And the traditional community of Hmong has never been confused between "illiteracy" and "ignorance".

Since the Hmong have never possessed its own writing, the traditional teaching, which was as much practical as moral and religious, remains deep-rooted in the heart of the group. This traditional teaching is essentially utilitarian and usable, and does not fall into the ridiculous anomalies encountered by certain modern teaching, such as in Africa and in Asia, which is often copied from the metropolises. We also find among the Hmongs, teachers, experts in the manufacture of arms, in music, and in traditional medicine who passed their knowledge and techniques to their descendants.

Besides these well-known teachers we must not forget the singers who maintain and renew an oral literature with all its enrichment, and the narrators from whom the people learn about history, geography, mythology, even elements of natural sciences and other things; we reserve and repeat without ending what we have been told and we draw conclusions, moral or others, which they imply.

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Social integration, at once the effect and cause of economic integration, is characterized by the extension of education to all levels, by the development of administrative and technical personnel, and by being conscious of the Lao nationality by the Hmong.

The extortions, the vexations, and the injustices of all kinds that the Hmong have submitted to in the past, ended by making them conscious of the necessity to improve themselves to better defend their interests. At first, the families joined together in order to send their brightest children to schools which were established exclusively in the plain. Afterwards, these students brought their support to the group in the reclaiming of their rights and to the Lao nation their collaboration in the building of multi-national structures.

Under the impulsion of the Hmong leaders from the Tranainh plateau, the first school was built in 1939 in the high Hmong region. Once started, schools developed very fast in the mountains of Xieng Khouang. In 1939 there were 9 Hmong students. In 1960 the number of students rose to 1,500 with 20 village schools. It reached 10,000 in 1969 with 7 groupes scolaires and a certain number of other schools. These schools were taught by 450 teachers the majority of which were Hmong. According to Mr. Moualia, the Primary School Inspector for Xieng Khouang Province, fifty percent of the Hmong children attended school in October 1969; these village schools were built in the South of the Plaine des Jarres. Little by little primary education has been extended to other mountainous regions of North Laos. 7d

This progress in education shows itself, in 1971, by the presence of 340 Hmong students in different schools, public or private, in the capital of Vientiane and by the registration of 37 Hmong in various subject matters of different universities in Japan, Australia, Canada, U.S., Italy, USSR, and above all France. Important note: we have not recorded any students abroad from the so-called "liberated" zone (except maybe in Hanoi). Several of these students are actually at the end of their studies. No doubt, all of them will return to Laos to contribute to the development of the country. The bond that ties them to their families, their consciences of belonging to a nation, are strong enough to bar, for the moment, all intellectual emigration among the Hmong.

Among Students Studying Abroad in 1971

Subject	Australia	Canada	U. S.	France	Italy	Japan	USSR
Agronomy .....	-	-	-	1	-	-	-
Econ. & Social Development..	-	-	-	2	-	-	-
Law .....	-	-	-	4	-	-	-
St-Gyr School (military school)	-	-	-	1	-	-	-
Electronics.....	-	1	-	-	-	1	-
Economics .....	-	-	2	4	-	-	1
N. I. P. S. (1) .....	-	-	-	2	-	-	-
Literature (2).....	-	2	1	2	1	-	-
Medicine .....	-	-	1	3	-	-	-
Pedagogy .....	-	-	-	2	-	-	-
Polytechniques .....	-	1	-	-	-	-	-
Sciences (2) .....	-	-	-	3	-	-	-
Sociology .....	1	-	-	1	-	-	-
37	1	4	4	25	1	1	1

(1) N. I. P. S. : National Institute of Practical Sciences

(2) Literature: Modern literature (French, English, Chinese & Vietnamese)  
History - Geography

(3) Sciences : Mathematics, Physics & Chemistry

But the evolution of the Hmong population could be more rapid if the educational system, in its program and methods, corresponded more to their socio-economic needs and if it were more adapted to their cultural environment. But, it is remarkable that actually all teachings are done in Lao, a language that the ethnic minorities do not always possess or possess insufficiently. Also, the great majority of Hmong children are seriously running into a linguistic barrier, rendering uncertain all intellectual progression and all acquisition of new knowledge. Because of this, an extremely high annual rate of school wastage, a relatively advanced age of students in the lower classes,<sup>1/</sup> and a significant return to illiteracy characterize the education of the Hmong.

In the course of communicating knowledge and ideas, which is education, language constitutes an essential base. No teacher will contest that the ideal vehicle of teaching is the native language of the child. "From the psychological point of view, it represents a system of symbols that function automatically in his mind when he wants to express himself or to understand. From the sociological point of view, it secures him closely to the community of which he is a part. From the pedagogical point of view, it allows the child to learn more quietly than in another language that he does not know very well."<sup>2/</sup>

The Lao government, wishing to put education "at the service of the whole Lao community," is not indifferent to this problem of language. In the regions inhabited by ethnic minorities, Lao language cannot be effectively learned and the cultural character preserved, since Lao language is not used outside of the school and in the home; also for mountain children, the years of schooling represent, in the majority of cases, only a very short period in their lives. It appears that not only does the present educational system, which is too academic, not prepare the young mountain people for a productive life in the future, but it also increases their feeling of frustration and runs the risk of

<sup>1/</sup> The average age of children entering the 6th grade was between 14 and 15 years in 1969.

<sup>2/</sup> UNESCO: "L'Emploi des Langues: Vocabulaire d'ac Enseignement", Paris, 1963, P. 15.

alienating them. Also, the Lao government stipulates, in the Reform Act of 1962, that "in every situation possible, the ethnic groups will begin their education in their native language along with education in the national language. Lao education is intended to make people physically healthy, morally balanced, possessing a sense of social life, capable of following a profession, attached to their villages, happy in their villages, all possessing, at their level, an authentic culture, modest though it be, and a true wisdom".<sup>1/</sup> But in reality, we are still far from implementing the provisions of the Reform which, if they were strictly applied, could only benefit all Lao citizens.

There is still another question: does the fact that an ethnic group continues to speak its own language, possesses its own writing, and develops its own culture constitute a real menace to the Lao unity? If this hypothesis holds, it would be logical that Switzerland and some Asian countries, and the world should have perished long time ago. However, the strength of these poly-ethnic states, which are of universal renown today, is the sense of a common destiny, a sense that will not be acquired without realistic, just, and adequate education. National unity does not necessarily mean ethnic, cultural, religious or ideological homogeneity. (This unity, purely idealist, exists nowhere in the world.) It is the product of common thinking which makes citizens of a country; whatever their social and ethnic origin may be, they are the men of equal rights, conscious and responsible, interdependent and strengthened by a grand patriotic sentiment. It is not without reason that the Neo Lao Hak Xat have endowed the Hmong nationality with their own writing which constitutes an effective arm for the social, economic, and political revolution of its party.

To give all the people a suitable and solid education, enabling them effectively to help themselves to assure their own development and to take in hand their own destiny, is the sole purpose that will justify the enormous effort of education in Laos.

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<sup>1/</sup> Ministry of Education, 1962 Education Reform Act

A genuine policy of development implies the raising of the level of literacy. It is certainly possible to increase production with modern agricultural techniques and by introducing seeds that will produce high yield (for example IR-5 and IR-8), and by the use of fertilizers. But the results acquired will not reflect the importance of the input of efforts. For the evolving technique, there will come a time when it will be necessary to "condition" the Lao farmers in general, and the Hmong in particular. Moreover, the producer himself will not be enriched, neither technically nor intellectually. We cannot have development without education which is the source of progress.

It is therefore evident that, basically, progress is the result of man's actions. Consequently, above all we must affect the individual by giving him the means of increasing his knowledge, his qualifications, his aptitudes, in order to realize his potential.

Education and development are two ideas that are closely connected. The development of a country is impossible without an adequate system of education that is capable of changing the attitudes of the people and making them receptive to new ideas, since they are still prisoners of their traditions and ancient customs, and often too wrapped up in themselves. The future of the Lao society--and more particularly Hmong--its progress in the essential domains such as health, technology, and economics will depend totally on the degree of its cultural development.

Traditional education, based on academic training, is more and more questionable. From this viewpoint, the failure of mass literacy and the progressive return to illiteracy are rather revealing among those individuals whose pattern of living and work remain unchanged, requiring neither reading nor writing. "All education or transmission of knowledge," explains Mr. Albert Meister, "fulfills a social need." Thus, the most retarded societies possess a richness of knowledge, of techniques, and of ways of living, transmitted by "a school without walls" from daily contact with adults. And if some of these societies have no written language it does not mean that they do not have any means to transmit such knowledge. Under these conditions, literacy for such societies can be considered a plague emanating from a cultural imperialism which recalls the missionary attitude of the last century. It is necessary to state that a waste of resources and energy

can result from literacy campaigns in many countries. This is true for Laos where the educational system remains very academic. The truth is that literacy ceases to be an end in itself and should become one of the aspects of technical training required to carry out development activities.

Mass literacy is gradually being abandoned and is being replaced by a new type of education: functional literacy which "turns its back absolutely on academic training and provides for manuals with technicians (agricultural and industrial)." Here is how Mr. Couvert defined this new type of Education: "Functional literacy is a technique which gives a group of people a readiness for development, and elicits attitudinal change to transform their behavior and personality so that their adaptation to modern ways of development continues in a harmonious fashion, without extreme psychological effects, without evoking attitudes of negativism, while preparing them for new planned learning to make them modern in their homes, in their villages, and in their fields. To attain this end, it is indispensable that they learn to manipulate a complicated skill, writing." Briefly, functional literacy aims, primarily, to enable the individual man, by technical and intellectual enrichment, to help himself by expanding his ideas, to act in situations, based on oral or written advice which he has become capable of adapting to his personal situation.

If such is the educational policy that the Lao government understands applicable, without discrimination throughout the country, the government can, without risking failure, no longer neglect the teaching of vernacular languages, at least the most important ones. Previously, we have seen unfortunate consequences of a policy of forced assimilation and the advantages resulting from teaching done, at least in the first years of school, in the native language. There is emphasis on orientation towards work as more important than learning of a second language, because of the necessity of finding the balance between economic development and the increasing population. Let's add that the choice of the language of literacy in itself can indicate a willingness for social integration.

The Hmong language has had an alphabet since 1956 in China, around 1960 in North Vietnam, in Thailand, and in Laos. The system called Barney-Smalley is, no doubt, the most well-known in the mountainous regions of North Laos. Contrary to what certain people tend to

think, we cannot see how this writing, the instrument of functional literacy, could harm the unity of the country. It has proved itself. Already thousands of youth and adults have used it to communicate among themselves and for an instrument of work with unquestionable efficiency: translation of texts and official news designed for radio broadcast, usage in instructions for medicine distributed, etc. Its acquisition, relatively simple,<sup>1/</sup> allows many Hmong then to learn the Lao language rapidly.

What is important is the thought from the heart. In fact, languages and alphabets do not constitute in themselves obstacles to nation building; but it is the injustice, the oppression, that are the causes of all social and national evils which still exist today in some parts of the world. Only an adequate education will safeguard the ethnic groups from this calamity by creating a community of reasoning and of good will, the solid basis for a modern nation.

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<sup>1/</sup> In one month for the most apt and in three months for others, but only a few hours for those who have already attended a Franco-Lao School.