

LAOS

Mr. Woodson

FORGOTTEN LAOS

THE NEXT-DOOR WAR

Translated from LE MONDE, Paris

Beyond peace in Vietnam lies the tortuous revolutionary entanglement in Laos. Here, in the now-shattered state created out of old French Indochina, years-long war and rebellion are being waged simultaneously. The rebellion is pressed on by the insurgent Pathet Lao and its pro-Communist political arm, the Neo Lao Haksat (Lao Patriotic Front) against Prince Souvanna Phouma's "coalition" government in Vientiane which is backed by U.S. air power. (The vital Ho Chi Minh trail cuts southward through Laos.) "Schools of anti-Americanism" are conducted for the rebels who, they claim, operate in nearly half of Laos' seventy-one provinces. Western correspondents rarely penetrate the rebel fastnesses to report on this distant war and to see the slow-step lamvong danced to the tune of the Khene. An anti U.S. antiwar French correspondent, Jacques Decornoy, chief of the Southeast Asia desk at Paris' independent daily Le Monde did go to the Laotian mountains to live among the guerrillas. His report.....

I Had come to Sam Neua Province from Hanoi, but had I changed countries? The Soviet made command car proceeded hiccupping over a road, struck by bombs, made slippery by the rain. Almost two full nights were needed to reach here, after much skidding in the mud and many dangerous encounters with trucks on the small mountain road.

When I finally arrived, I climbed a wooden ladder leaning on the limestone rock to reach the cave-hotel, a natural hole in the mountain, "improved" with dynamite. Then I went from one "room" to another, walking on a sharp stone floor to finally reach my "room". From my bed I could see the sky through a slit in the mountain. The wind was cold, but an extraordinary bit of bad luck would be needed for a rocket to settle in this hole. A small motor distributed that rare commodity in "Liberated Laos": electricity.

This landmark for pursued guerrilla fighters is managed by a young woman who is a graduate of Moscow University, and the daughter of a neutralist Laotian Minister who was assassinated in Vientiane in 1963. Life here is very simple. A washbasin is placed on the rocky platform that is the entrance to the cave. It is dangerous for anyone to stick his nose too far out of the mountain. In fact, it is sometime impossible to finish shaving, because jets coming from Thailand are roaming about. . During the rainy season water drips drearily into the cave. It is an eerie, silent world at all times for the inhabitants of the surrounding villages have also taken to the mountains. A few water buffalo, a few pigs walk around at our feet, among the American bomb holes.

It was a "usual" day with planes prowling around for ten minutes or so out of every thirty. One dropped its load only a few feet

from our shelter three times. It was not amazing under these conditions to see a Secretary of State of the defunct National Union Government (stipulated by the Geneva Conference of 1962) arrive at the hotel out of breath because he had run from one cave to another with some documents in his hand. In this region that they control and administer, the Laotians of the left are guerrilla fighters in their own home, camouflaging themselves in the shelter of the rocks, as if the enemy reigned in the valley, where as he is only master of the sky.

Life in the caves presents some disadvantages to the farmers. It presents more serious ones to the politicians and the administrators who must govern an immense, mountainous country, stretching from China to Cambodia, where distances are counted in days or nights of marching. However, the people go on working, and show not the slightest intention of giving in. "Owl by day, fox at night," a Laotian proverb says.

The village of Bane Kang, very close to Vietnam, is one of the few regions in which life is not entirely lived in caves. A few unexploded bombs do lie around, over-flights are frequent, but I was able to sleep there without fear in one of those houses on piling under which flocks of ducks and herds of black pigs cross day and night. In the hot afternoon men and women go to the stream, at different places, to bathe. On the other bank, some officials proudly took me on a tour of the rice fields. The second harvest of the year was growing there, and though such a sight is commonplace in rural Vietnam, it is revolutionary in Laos.

The village is prosperous and there is no lack of gluey rice, fruit or fowl. It is kept impeccably, and there is no sign of an endemic disease or of undernourishment. Although there was no school before 1954, today all the children attend school. They can be seen working in their small classrooms, close to the houses where the women weave their clothing. The men who are not in the field smoke the water pipe or drink rice alcohol from a jug. A struggle is being waged against adult illiteracy.

Here and there, mimeographed tracts or pictures praising the achievements of the Pathet Lao, friendship between racial groups or the burial of a American airplane by a team of militiamen, are posted on the houses. Because of the difficult traveling, central directives have to move very slowly. But the village has two transistor radios that pick up Radio Sam Neua. There are no loud-speakers as in Vietnam or China. "We have made some tests. The people do not like that," an official told me. A matter of temperament. The philosophy of life is more quiet here, in spite of everything, than in the neighboring countries. They like noise, but the noise that they themselves produce by singing, by beating on a drum, by playing the Khone, a small bamboo instrument whose sound reminds one of the harmonica. They dance the Lamvong with its slow steps and graceful twisting of arms and fingers. They sing of victories over the forces of the right to music that is appropriate for making love in the shade of coconut palms or eating the juicy pulp of the mango. Someone stands up and improvises a poem on a traditional topic. Every time the author, or merely the reciter, announces the origin of the song: for example, "Phong Saly Province" or "Minority in such-and-such district" Once this peasant attachment of origin has been clearly emphasized, the poem talks of the Laotian nation, of Prince Souphanouvong, of the

"puppets" in the capital, of the "American aggressors." On the dreary nights in Vientiane, American pilots re-create the depraved atmosphere of Saigon, thanks to their pay and to the prostitutes. Do they know that in the villages and the caves over which they have just flown or that they have just bombed, a rural population is creating a Laotian nationality, is dancing only Laotian dances and is turning its culture, as well as its political ideology, into a weapon against foreign interventions?

"Of course, but they are Communists," the good apostles reply forgetting that if one of the lads improvises a poem entitled: "Salute the Anti-Aircraft Defense," it is because American aircraft incessantly threaten their lives. Besides, are they Communists? The Pathet Lao certainly is not working hand in hand with Hanoi and all the socialist countries "for nothing." But it is Laotian as the Vietnamese are Vietnamese, which is saying quite a bit. I have no precise information about the influence of Hanoi on the Pathet Lao, but I constantly observed the virulent nationalism of the "Liberated Laotians" in the teaching of geography and history, in their culture and in their methods of organizing society. For instance, it is necessary to control the water in order to achieve the second harvest and one would think this would lead to more collectivization of work, but today only a simple system of mutual aid is practiced. The political philosophy inculcated in the officials has the flexibility of young bamboo. Conversations never bear the imprint of that rigidity found in North Vietnam and among the leaders of the National Liberation Front in the South.

The Pathet Lao insists on the need for the National Union Government provided for by the 1962 Geneva agreements. While awaiting the fulfillment of this desire, it has to administer and develop the areas under its control: two-thirds of the territory; containing according to it, around a million inhabitants, or 50 percent of the population. That is why, in January 1968, it held its "first economic and financial congress, setting up a three-year plan, one of the dominant ideas of which is to give the country on every level, from the hamlet to the province, as much economic autonomy as possible. In that way it could alleviate in part the lack of rapid communications and thus increase production.

However, it is not possible to scatter small industrial centers or large schools everywhere. Hence, the existence of so-called Central Committee production or training centers in Sam Neua Province. A visit to one of them provides some surprises.

I left the command car somewhere to climb some rock piles, to leap over bamboo hedges protecting the fields from the voracious appetite of the water buffalo, to reach finally some very dimly lighted straw huts. Modern and traditional pharmaceutical products are made here. The work is done only at night, in order to better conceal it. It is sometimes difficult for the polite foreigner not to reveal his apprehension before drinking a brew of monkey bones or deer horns, which is said to invigorate and heal. However, very serious research is also being conducted in Hanoi on the basis of this traditional pharmacopoeia.

In another place we visited some caves that shelter forges. The raw material comes from Vietnam or from salvaged American missiles and trucks. Household appliances, farming implements, machetes come out of these shops.

Men and women workers sleep in the daytime in the damp, rocky recesses that hum with mosquitoes. Most amazing is the cave that can be reached only by scaling crude steps cut into the steep wall of a mountain. Here military uniforms are woven on ancient spinning wheels. After working eight hours the weavers go down into the valley to grow rice, raise pigs, hunt for wood in the forest... and take the necessary political and cultural courses. The director of the school explained that the school serves not only to raise the level of culture, but also to defend the country, to "serve the people," to teach them to "hate the Americans." The teacher must also be able to conduct firing practice.

An American diplomat in Vientiane expressed in my presence the opinion that "for Laos to achieve some progress, it will be necessary to level everything to make the inhabitants come back to zero, to rid them of their traditional culture, which is blocking everything." Now, in Vientiane, a city that is becoming "Saigonized," that is rotting morally and culturally, it is possible to observe an irrational and futureless mixture of the Laotian traditional way of life and of a search for Western "values": rudiments of French, rudiments of English, fascination with money, and with Japanese motorcycles and cars. The nightclubs are full of Siamese prostitutes and Philippine orchestras, scrambling after money. On Army Day, General Kouprasith Abhay, who commands Vientiane, sat enthroned alongside Miss Thailand, something many young officers found to be in more than doubtful taste. In the capital, little is said of the terror that is upsetting the "liberated areas." They survive by knowing "This cannot last." And the training of officials, of teachers, of farmers, of workers in the "liberated" caves is ~~on~~ considered to be a necessity about which nothing can be done. The Americans accuse the North Vietnamese of intervening militarily in the country. But they are the ones who talk about making Laos come back to zero, while the Pathet Lao exalts Laotian culture and independence.

"Vientiane makes me think of an underdeveloped district of Mississippi," an American colleague who was stopping there between Hanoi and Washington complained when we landed there. It is a strange district. In the areas not under control by the Government, American aircraft shoot at everything that moves, but Peking, Moscow and Hanoi have diplomatic representatives there. As for the United States, they maintain a real colony: villas scattered about the capital, an "American quarter" with American streets, American lawns, American Bermuda shorts, American fences. The merchants advertise in English. It is necessary to add the hippies, of whom a good number have come from the other side of the Pacific. Some, between two cigarettes that are not made of tobacco, sit around singing Bob Dylan folk songs, seemingly oblivious of the destruction being inflicted just north of here by the society they claim to have fled.

In a bar, a high civil servant announced the capture by the Pathet Lao of a small Government post in the south. How did he learn the news? From the Government? Certainly not. From the military? No. From whom then? From an athletic team that had just returned from the south.

The Mekong river flows sixty feet from the bar. On the other side is Thailand. This border is one of the most porous in the world, very convenient for smuggling. But the real smuggling traffic,

which is in gold and opium, is carried on by airplanes. The Tet offensive was received badly in Vientiane :it blocked the Saigon-Tan Son Nhut Airport.

Can the Pathet Lao take over the country's destiny, if it wishes to ? After visiting part of the territory controlled by the Pathet Lao, it seemed to me that it lacks technical and even political personnel. The vast distances, the mountainous regions, the meager heritage left by the colonial period—all these factors partly explain the poverty. Compared with " Liberated Laos, " North Vietnam appears fabulously rich, intellectually. They have rice and pork in Sam Neua, but they never receive a foreign newspaper or book. A well-known physician told me that he would like to be able to make use of French technical journals. Many officials at all levels could, in spite of their harassing work, in spite of the air raids, in spite of a lack of electricity, read and learn in their caves, but they have absolutely nothing. Their very difficult living conditions, their self-denial, their ideas therefore remain unknown, "forgotten " , like the war they are living through. One of them told me: "Sometimes, I wonder what I am doing here. I could be in Vientiane, with money, girls and cars. But no; here is where it is necessary to be ".

This human handicap may hinder the political and military activities of the Pathet Lao, for ideals and the certainty of being right cannot make up for everything. The fact remains that a good part of the population— let us omit haphazard percentages— has been living too long on these lands for a backward movement to be possible. And, since the system prevailing in the rest of the country does not lead to any future prospects, the political development of Laos should logically follow a settlement of the Vietnamese conflict. When their skies have been freed of the terrifying presence of American aircraft and when the foreign military " advisors " have left, it will perhaps be possible for the Laotians to lay out their own course. A stay among the Pathet Lao allows the assumption that, in rejecting American guidelines, this course will not take too much inspiration from the Vietnamese example does not copy the Chinese or Soviet model.

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