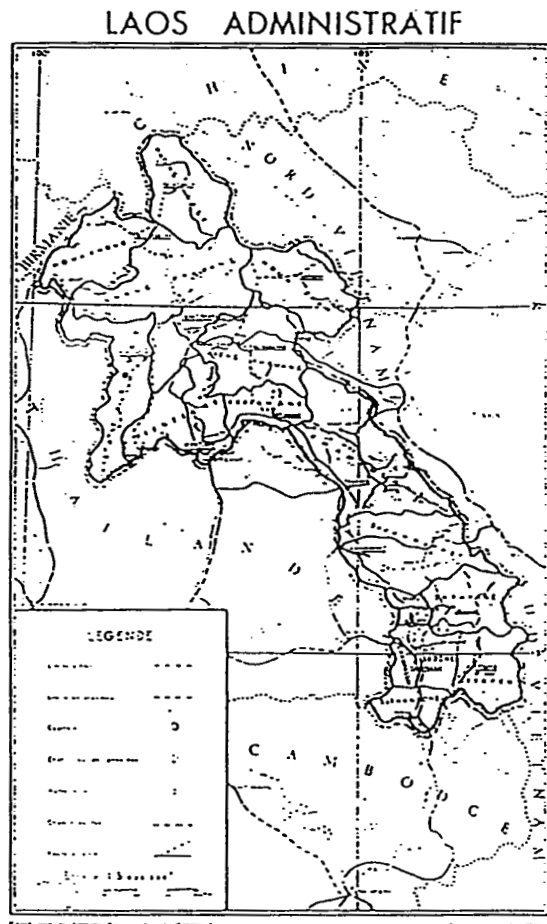


The Meo of Xieng Khouang Province

By George L. Barney
Joel M. Halpern, Editor



Laos Paper No.13
University of Mass.
Amherst, Mass.

© by Joel M. Halpern
1990

Reprinted by Dalley Book Service
90 Kimball Lane
Christiansburg, VA 24073

Phone: 703/382-8949

CONTENTS

	Page
THE PEOPLE AND THE AREA	1
MINOR ETHNIC GROUPS	3
MEO SOCIAL ORGANIZATION	5
MEO POLITICAL ORGANIZATION	9
MEO ECONOMY	13
MEO MATERIAL CULTURE	16
MEO FOLKLORE AND BELIEFS	18
MEO LIFE CYCLE	22
RECENT CHANGES IN MEO CULTURE	24
FOOTNOTES	28

THE MEO OF NORTHERN LAOS

The People and the Area:¹

The Meo people spread over the mountain areas of much of South-east Asia. "The Miao, a mountain dwelling people in South and West China, constitute one of the largest aboriginal groups of South China, numbering in the millions."² In North Vietnam the Meo number about 60,000,³ in Thailand a few thousand,⁴ and "in Laos they live scattered in high mountain areas and are said to number about 50,000."⁵

The Meo are in the process of drifting southward. Since they are such vast numbers and yet have no territory of their own, they have been a state of unrest for centuries.⁶ Roux, who has followed the development of Meo history in Indochina, states: "It seems, if one can judge by the transformations which they (the Meo) have carried to the terrain during the forty years that I have followed them, that their first migrations do not go beyond 120 to 140 years. Those who were already 'village elders,' some of whom were over forty years of age, informed me that their fathers came from the extreme west of the Chinese province of 'Sze-Tchouan' from the eastern slopes of the Himalayas,"⁷ This would give credence to statements of the writer's informants that their ancestors first entered Xieng Khouang Province about a century ago.

Xieng Khouang Province is located in northern Laos.⁸ The provincial capital which carries the same name is located about 193.5 degrees east of Greenwich and about 19 degrees north of the equator. The province is largely a plateau of about 4000 feet altitude surrounded by mountains which rise 1000 to 5000 feet above the plateau.

Roux states that an estimated 30,000 Meo lived in the eastern part of the Province of Xieng Khouang in 1920.⁹ It is not surprising, therefore, that a recent estimate (1959) placed the number of Meo in the entire province as 45,000. This estimate was given in conversation by the Laotian governor.

In the Province of Xieng Khouang there is a general classification of the three major ethnic groups according to the toponymy:

Lao. The Lao live principally in river valleys, where they carry on irrigated wet rice culture. In addition to this staple crop, they grow tobacco, straw for making thatched roofs, and divers minor crops. They know some crafts, such as pottery making and weaving, but very few of their number approach the status of specialists. The Lao live in elevated bamboo or

wooden houses with thatched roofs. A very few live in better houses with plastered walls and tile roofs. These are usually government officials and merchants.

The Lao are politically dominant in Laos, but maintain only a narrow margin of authority in Xieng Khouang. They are Buddhistic, and their strong adherence to their religion is a cohesive integrative force in their society. Most males spend some years in the "pagodas" in study. The Lao society and culture appears well integrated with no major stress or unsatisfied needs being evidenced.

Khmu: The Khmu, who are located in the foothills, carry on both wet rice farming and mountain rice horticulture. They live in houses which resemble the Lao in style but which are generally of bamboo, and less durable.

The Khmu are decidedly a political minority. They give little indication of attempting or desiring to attain political autonomy or political recognition.

...the Khmu show signs of deterioration and disintegration. The gongs and jars of tremendous value which are characteristic of tribal peoples in southeast Asia, and which are remembered as a part of Khmu culture of the past, are virtually gone. In all of southeast Asia these gongs and jars are a focal point of interest in the culture. They are symbols of prestige and wealth. The fact that they have disappeared among the Khmu, and that apparently nothing has replaced them, is certainly of significance.¹⁰

The Khmu, who have borrowed much from the Lao, have not adopted Buddhism. They have a form of animism.

Meo: The Meo are usually located high on the flanks of the mountains but just below the summit. Their culture is described in greater detail below, but a few items are given at this point for comparison with the Lao and Khmu.¹¹

The Meo engage primarily in "slash and burn" agriculture. Dry mountain rice is their staple food. Their homes of rough wooden boards are built on the ground. Corn and some vegetables are grown, but they are particularly known for their production of opium.

The Meo appear to have maintained a higher degree of social and political solidarity than the Khmu. In the material culture, the Meo have retained their distinctive dress, are reluctant to use the official local currency, and persist in their traditional habitat. In the abstract and subjective realm, the Meo

continue in an acute consciousness of Meo society and culture, and reflect this consciousness in their rigid refusal to adopt freely elements of Lao culture.

Minor Ethnic Groups: With rare exception, the minor ethnic groups of the province are located in or near Xieng Khouang town. The town, with a population of about 1,500 people, serves as the administrative and commercial center for the province. Vietnamese artisans, Chinese traders, Indian cloth merchants, and representatives of Western cultures may be found in town. The western cultural influence is carried on by those who represent Western governments, serve as missionaries, operate the office of a commercial airline, and a few legionnaires who have settled in the area as ranchers or artisans.

Since this paper will deal with the Meo who live in the general proximity of Xieng Khouang town, the writer feels it worthwhile to give just a brief description of the area. The most prominent building in the town was a huge palatial structure which served as the residence for the French Counsellor. The Laotian governor, entitled "Chao Khoueng," lived in a large but less imposing home. These and a few other buildings were constructed of brick and tile. Such buildings belonged to officials, the French army, and a few local business men. Public buildings consisted of a school, a health clinic, office buildings for the government, and the daily market pavilion. Only one street ran through the town, with the above-mentioned buildings and eight small shops being located along its sides.

Back of these more prominent buildings, the general population lived in scattered clusters of homesteads. Some such clusters might be limited to a single ethnic group, while others might be inhabited by several groups. The dwellings were of any architecture and built of any combination of materials. One sensed that most of the inhabitants considered their residences to be only temporary.

Only the eighth month festival and the daily market served as integrating elements for the community in Xieng Khouang town. The school was limited in its enrolment, and the numerous religious groups precluded any cohesion along religious lines.

Before the arrival of the writer in this area, a road had been maintained from the Coast in Vinh, Viet-Nam, to the border of Thailand. This road passed through Xieng Khouang. Because of difficulties of maintenance during the Communist activities, this road was closed. Travel in and out of the province had to be by plane. A small airline operated the sturdy DC3 planes during the dry season, and a smaller bush plane during the rainy season. Communications were made either by letter or by the public wireless. These services followed a semblance of regularity, but were never certain.

The rainy season served to isolate the area for the most part. Trails were slippery and dangerous, landslides were common, and air travel infrequent and dangerous. Often weeks would pass with no plane being able to land, but supplies and mail continued to come to the area by parachute. In sharp contrast, the dry season brought much activity in town and even to the remote parts of the province. Fields were being cleared to be burned off later. Trails, roads, bridges and buildings were repaired, and merchants competed with one another to charter planes to bring in new stocks and to replenish their supplies. Prices would begin to drop as scarce items became plentiful and the rice was being harvested. Nevertheless, air freight charges made imported products two and three times higher than prices at the coast. People moved about, and the market became an exciting place with many new items appearing on the racks. Such was Xieng Khouang town around which lived the Meo, Lao, and Khmu in ever widening arcs. Except for some groups who had moved into temporary quarters close to town, the nearest Meo village was an hour away by trail. Other villages which were five days away from Xieng Khouang still considered the town as their administrative and trading center.

Xieng Khouang was also the home of a very important Meo personage named Touby. He is singled out at this point because of his unique position. Touby was recognized by the French colonial government, and now is recognized by the independent Laotian government as the representative of the Meo people. He is highly respected by both the government and his own Meo society. Touby and the provincial governor are comparatively young men and maintain a close relationship on both personal and official levels.

Touby has championed the Meo people. While holding a position of influence with the administration, he also commands the respect, confidence, and support of the Meo. He is known throughout the whole area, and the Meo are quick to respond to requests made by him.

Just how and when Touby attained this status is not known to the writer. He lives next to the Lao governor, maintains a Meo militia, and has been influential in having Meo young people admitted to the public schools. During World War II and again during the Communist invasion of 1953-1953, he was given a field station beside the French and Lao commanders, and through his Meo militia furnished the government forces with almost uncanny intelligence and "guerrilla" support. Perhaps the latter is a factor in his present "role." Both the French-Lao administration and the Meo people hated the Japanese and Communist forces. Touby helped to integrate the two groups in driving out these invaders.

Today the government sees Touby as the representative of the Meo and the communicator between the Meo people and the administration. The Meo see Touby from the other side, as one who can influence the government and communicate the "mind" of the Meo to the government in an effective manner. Thus Touby appears to be the "connecting link: between the Lao governmental organization and the Meo's indigenous political system which extends only to the district level. In effect, the various districts are now brought together in an office which they have not instituted but in which Touby has been installed, with power, by the government. He is in a position to bring pressure to bear on the government in behalf of the Meo, and likewise, he is able to influence the Meo toward adherence to the government's programs. For the purpose of this paper, the writer considers Touby as the "paramount chief" of the Meo in Xieng Khouang Province.

Meo Social Organization.

It appears that a patrilineal clan system not only dominates Meo social organization but also serves as a primary integrating factor in Meo culture as a whole. It functions in a cohesive manner to interrelate the social, political, economic, and religious aspects of Meo culture.

The household is the basic unit in the Meo social structure. The term "household" must be treated somewhat loosely, since it need not refer only to those who live in one house. Rather, it includes those persons who are under the authority of the householder. This means that a man's (householder's) household will consist of his wife or wives, his children, their wives and children; and possibly children in the next generation. In addition, the household may have a few relatives who are too feeble, either physically or mentally, to maintain normal responsibilities, and are dependent upon their relatives in this particular household.

Members of a household always carry their clan name in addition to their given names. The clan names generally find their origin in mythology. Complete strangers who are unable to discover any common ancestry but who have the same clan name consider each other to be "clan brothers" and, consequently, observe any formalities or behavior which are therefore incumbent upon them.

Members of the same lineage refer to one another in a common term, ku to kew ti, "my youngers and olders." In the household the members call each other by specific terms which designate the actual relationship of "ego" to any other members of the household. Thus, even in everyday speech language serves to reinforce the traditional social structure in the minds of the Meo and implicitly indoctrinates the children in the same.

The numerical factor determines the actual domicile of the members of a household. One may observe as many as 34 people living under one roof. Frequently a married son may erect a house close to his father's home into which he moves after a child is born. This would not be considered as a new household in the sense that the term is used in this paper.

The household as a unit serves to train the children. Although children are basically the responsibility of their immediate parents, it appears that everyone in the household takes a part in the informal education and training of a younger person. Corrections may be made by elders without incurring the bad will of the parents. One never observes corporal punishment of children, but deep respect and obedience to parents and elders are characteristic of the Meo.

The Meo place high value on old age. In their conception, anyone of old age should have respect. The term of respect in Meo is Txi Lau, "grandfather," or Na Lau, "grandmother." These terms may be applied to younger people who have attained special status and deserve this sort of respect. The Meo train their young people to be self-reliant, and they admire a strong individualistic spirit. A stranger is impressed by the manners and poise that a young Meo boy will demonstrate when he is alone. Among his elders, he is just one of a group in the presence of the respected elders.

Within a household a young man may disagree with his father only in the mildest erms, although he may oppose him strongly. As a man assumes family responsibilities, he may become increasingly self-assertive, but should always pay deference to his aging father. The women are recognized as possessing authority over the children, but in all family considerations the father's word is final authority. Yet, should a father be the son of a householder, he is expected to acquiesce to the will of the householder.

In a Meo village one may find from one to forty houses. The average village has about eight houses. A village may have but one household, in which case the householder has the status of authority. Often there may be several households in a village, in which case the eldest householder usually functions as village head. Furthermore, some large villages have more than one clan represented. In this latter case, some complications appear in the pattern. This will be more fully discussed under "Political Organization."

While a distinct unit in the social organization, the household operates in a sphere which is largely defined by the patrilinear clan system. This is illustrated in the concepts of marriage and the events leading to it.

The practice of exogamous marriage is part of the customary law. In keeping with the principal that no one should marry a person of his own clan, a modified brother-sister taboo is observed between members of the opposite sex when they are of the same clan. Therefore, it is improper for a young man to manifest frivolity with a girl bearing his clan name./

After puberty a young man may attempt to gain the attention of a young girl of his liking. Of course she must be from a different clan. Acquaintance is often made and developed at such events as the New Year Festival Season. A village usually invites villages of another clan to come for festivities, which include games, contests, visiting and feasting. The village is likely to receive a reciprocal invitation before the five-day period is ended.

At such times everyone comes in his or her best clothing along with all the silver ornaments that can be accumulated. Girls proudly wear their colorful skirts as a display of their ability to sew and embroider. The young men demonstrate their prowess with horses and in contests. The playing of various musical instruments and the constant serenades add to the atmosphere of the occasion.

A hand ball game is always in order. Lines of young men form opposite to lines of young women. Partners, each from a different clan, stand facing each other. The girl produces a ball which she has made from wads of cloth. This is tossed back and forth with her partner. Serenading accompanies the tossing of the ball, and may continue for hours at a time. Traditionally, scores are kept of all dropped balls with each error being penalized, whereby the guilty party must discard one garment, as in "strip" piker. The writer never observed this practice in either Christian or non-Christian villages, but he noted other penalties being paid, such as gifts or "dates" for the evening. However, flirting would be a mild term to use for the boy-girl relationship during such festival seasons. The writer has been told by his informants that sex-play is quite free during the evening hours.

If the relationship between a boy and a girl develops into a serious interest for each other, the boy finds excuses to visit her village. Trial marriage, a normal practice among the Meo, is carried on with a semblance of disapproval by the girl's parents. It is customary for a girl who has attained puberty to sleep on a platform apart from the rest of her family. The young suitor may be expected to visit her during the night, but must come and go surreptitiously while the rest of the family is asleep. If the young girl responds favorably to the young man's advances, the romance should end in marriage.

