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## The Old Man: A Biographical Account of a Lao Villager

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**THE OLD MAN:  
A BIOGRAPHICAL ACCOUNT  
OF A LAO VILLAGER**

**By  
FRED BRANFMAN**

**Introduction and Edited By  
JOEL M. HALPERN  
and  
JAMES A. HAFNER**

**INTERNATIONAL AREA STUDIES PROGRAM  
UNIVERSITY OF MASSACHUSETTS AT AMHERST**

**1979**

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**May 1979**

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Occasional Papers Series No. 4**

**International Area Studies Program  
University of Massachusetts at Amherst**

THE OLD MAN

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## Introduction

This paper is a companion piece to The Village of the Deep Pond, Ban Xa Phang Meuk, Laos issued by the Asian Studies Committee in 1978 as Occasional Paper No. 3. Both studies grow out of the work of Fred Branfman who resided in a village, nine kilometers from downtown Vientiane, the capital and major city of Laos. He spent approximately a year and a half in the community during 1968-69. Although he was not a trained social scientist, he was a good observer, knew the language, and had worked in U.S. government aid programs as a member of the International Voluntary Service where he was concerned with programs of rural development. His observations are now approximately a decade old and the local scene has changed dramatically following the coming to power of the Pathet Lao and the disintegration of the Royal Lao government in 1975.

The value of these studies does not lie in depicting a current situation as such, but rather in conveying the texture of rural life as experienced by one villager during his six decades of life. Although his life span included the French colonial regime, the Japanese occupation, the struggle for independence and the subsequent civil war, there is little reflection of these national level conflicts in this old man's account. Rather, he was concerned with more fundamental problems of raising a family and producing enough food for his household. Although his proximity to the city did influence his life, and particularly that of his children, his recollections still relate primarily to a subsistence oriented rural economy and the context of a face to face village

community.

The biographical account grows out of a long series of conversations that Branfman had with this villager. While this account is not phrased in the conceptual framework of the professional anthropologist it does form a valuable record based on direct participant observation and is best read in conjunction with The Village of the Deep Pond. It can also stand on its own and be compared to other biographical accounts of peasant life in Southeast Asia and elsewhere.

For context with respect to other studies of village life, especially the Vientiane Plain, there is the work of the Japanese anthropologist Tsuneo Ayabe on a neighboring village in the 1950s and the more general work of Howard Kaufman on the Vientiane Plain. This American anthropologist wrote his observations at the time of his employment by the Community Development Division of the American aid mission in the late 1950s. Both of these reports were published in the Laos Project Papers (nos. 14 and 12 respectively) edited by J. Halpern. A general perspective, drawing in part on these specific monographs, is presented for Laos as a whole in J. Halpern's Economy and Society of Laos, A Brief Survey (Monograph Series No. 5, Southeast Asia Studies, Yale University, 1964). For other Lao biographies from various strata of society, including both villagers and those who were born in rural areas and achieved urban careers, see J. Halpern's "Laos Profiles," (Laos Project Paper No. 18).

A number of these biographies are reproduced in the monograph by the same author, Government, Politics and Social Structure in Laos, A Study of Tradition and Innovation (Monograph Series No. 4, Southeast Asia Studies, Yale University, 1964) in the Appendix of which the "Memoirs of a Young Lao Official," covers some of the same ground but from a more politically aware point of view. Finally, also from the 1950s, is the work of the French anthropologist, Georges Condominas. His publications encompass a detailed survey of the Vientiane Plain and an analysis of the role of religion in village life. An introduction to his work in English translation is available in Laos: War and Revolution (edited by Nina S. Adams and Alfred W. McCoy, Harper and Row, N.Y., 1970, pp. 9-27), where specific references to his works in French are cited.

The world of the old villager depicted in these pages is now historical, his children, even those who remained in the village lead vastly different lives. The new government of Laos has instituted many changes but the attitudes and values which this villager presents to the reader are essential to an understanding of the present. Some aspects of these recollections such as commitment to religious activities, attitudes toward work, perceptions of the status structure, and specifics of the functioning of the kinship system are particular to Lao-Thai culture. Others, such as involvement with the seasonal cycle of crop cultivation, the constant readjustment to changes in life and family-household cycles as children

mature and old age comes about, the often unsuccessful struggle to earn a living and the attempt to adapt to village and family politics, are more universal themes.

The editors have intentionally preserved Branfman's informal style and his accounts of personal interaction with the Old Man and other villagers.

The initial assembling of the material presented in this paper was made possible by a grant received by Joel M. Halpern in 1969 from the Southeast Asia Development Advisory Group of the Asia Society.

Joel M. Halpern  
Amherst, Massachusetts  
January 10, 1979

NOTE: The following Lao terms are used: *po* (father), *po tou* (grandfather or old man), *me* (mother), *me tou* (grandmother or old woman), *bak* (little boy), *ee* (little girl), *nai* (headman), *nya po* (respected elder), and *phi* (spirit).

## SUMMARY

Po Tou Douang (grandfather), seventy, grew up the traditional way, never going to school. When he was about seventeen he entered the temple where he spent the next four years learning to read and write Pali and Lao. In his early twenties he married his first wife, lived with her for about a year, got divorced, waited some time, and two or three years later married his present wife. They had six children, five of whom are still living; four girls and two boys. They have had about thirty-two grandchildren, twenty-six of whom survive. Four out of his five children live in downtown Vientiane and one still in the village near the old man.

He worked as a traditional farmer all his life. His basic economic activity was farming rainy season paddy, and he usually had a surplus to sell. Income was usually used to maintain the house and send his children to school but he has had few consumer goods. For five years he tried driving a *samlaw* during the dry season, sleeping in the village at night, going downtown by day, but never made any money. Other marginal economic activities included his wife's running a little store for a while, farming a vegetable garden, and occasionally selling baskets but it didn't amount to very much. He retired around 1964-65 and now lives on what his children provide, and half the proceeds from his rice fields which are now farmed by another family. The other half of his rice fields are farmed by the daughter who lives in the village.

The old man is very religious, following practices which

harmoniously integrate a belief in Buddhism and the *phi* (spirits).

He is basically apolitical in practice, not really liking either side (the Royal Lao or Pathet Lao).

In the village he has some respect as a village elder, but this is mainly restricted to his immediate neighbors and kin group and pertains to traditional activities such as advising on the proper dates to get married, or build a new house. Other than this his main focus is his family. He has little or no political power even in the village.

Basically traditionalist in psychological makeup as well as behavior, times have passed him by. He is not in control of very much, but endures. On the whole he leads a cheerful and integrated existence, his greatest sources of happiness being his wife. There is also the success of his son Khamphoung, an army doctor making artificial limbs in Vientiane, who speaks English, and has been around the world. In his daily activities his greatest concrete source of unhappiness is lack of economic security.

### Early Years

He was born around 1900, in a house about 200 yards from where he now lives (the village is about nine kilometers from the city of Vientiane). The site is now occupied by the present *nai ban*'s (village chief's) house, who was given the land by the old man after he married the old man's niece (daughter of an older brother).

His father and mother had seven children. The old man was fifth, having three older brothers and one older sister, and one younger brother and a younger sister. They're all dead now, though they all lived long enough to get married and have families. Besides the *nai ban*'s wife, there are two other nieces still living in the village.

The old man spent his first seventeen years doing rural chores: helping his father grow rice, fish, build things, and most importantly, look after the buffalo which was his special responsibility. He didn't go to school because there was no school in the village or nearby. In fact he says that there was only one school available in downtown Vientiane.

At the age of seventeen the old man entered the *wat* (monastery) as a novice. It was here that he first learned to read both Lao and Pali. He stayed in the *wat* for about four years, remaining until the age of twenty-one and one month. Since at twenty-one one qualifies to become a monk he probably left then because he had attained this status. But he also wanted to leave the *wat* because as he explains it, "I was thinking about girls."

He went back to live with his parents for about a year after leaving the *wat*, doing much of what he'd done before.

About a year later he married. The girl lived in Ban Sai, about two kilometers east of his native village of Ban Phang Meuk. He insists that until he got married he had never slept with a girl.

After getting married he went to live in Ban Sai, at his wife's house, as is customary. But things didn't work out. He felt the problem was because "the girl and her family hated me because I didn't have any money." His first wife's family was well off, having land and buffalo and they kept getting after him to go get a job and earn money. He didn't do so because "during the rainy season I was too busy farming rice and during the dry season it was too hot to work." (Any work he could have found would probably have been as a coolie laborer.)

Finally, when the whole family "hated" him and his wife was refusing to sleep with him, he decided to get divorced. They called a meeting with the *nai ban* and village elders. The matter was discussed and the divorce was arranged. He returned to live with his parents. Even now he doesn't like to talk very much about this first marriage, and usually insists that his present wife was his first and only one.

He was divorced around November and spent the next rainy season at his parents' home helping them grow rice. Near the end of that rainy season he built them a new house, since their old one was in bad shape.

A few days after finishing his parents' house, he went over to Ban Pha Phao, a village about 3 km. south of Ban Xa Phang Meuk and brought a new wife back to live with him at a house about five yards away from his present home. This woman remains his wife to this day and is usually called "*Me tou Douang*" (Old mother of Douang, the first child). The

old man is called "*Po Tou Douang*" (Old father of Douang).

He says that his new wife has "never hated" him. One of the reasons he suggests for this is the fact that she was a poor orphan and didn't expect a rich husband. The fact that she was an orphan and poor also explains why he brought her to live with him in his village instead of going to live in her village as is usually the case.

The old man jokes about bringing his new bride to live with him in a house the size of "the chicken coop over there in Po Kham's yard." It was located about 200 yards from his father's house, about five yards from his present home.

The old man's father, Nai Poo, came from Xieng Khouang Province, a few years before 1900 and he was the first one born in Ban Xa Phang Meuk. He estimates that the fourth child, a sister, was about three years older and that the other children were born at approximately equal intervals. His understanding was that the main reason Nai Poo left Xieng Khouang was because of the difficulties of travel in the mountains. He once heard a story from his father about getting salt. He saddled up and set out. It was a long arduous journey and after a month, half the time sleeping out in the open, he still hadn't completed his trip.

So his father came to the Vientiane plain and settled in Ban Xa Phang Meuk. As hard as it is to visualize now, Ban Xa Phang Meuk at that time was almost entirely wilderness. There were only footpaths wide enough for an ox-cart to go to Vientiane, a small town then. The main reason Nai Poo picked

the site was that it bordered on land suitable for growing lowland paddy rice. Apparently there were no people at Ban Xa Phang Meuk when Nai Poo first came. He came with four children, his wife, various household belongings, buffalo and with two other men from Xieng Khouang. These three men are the founders of the village of Ban Xa Phang Meuk. One of them was the father of two of the most important men in the village today: the father of the present *nai ban*, Chanthi (who had also occupied this office); and his older brother, Acharn Kuu Boua, the village monk for some twenty years, and presently the all-purpose religious leader, counselor and curer. The descendants of the three original settlers today all live within a few hundred yards of each other including Naiban Chanthi's wife who is a niece of the old man.

Po Tou Douang grew up in a subsistence based household. Clothing, pants, shirts, dresses were all spun from cotton grown in the family's *hai* (upland) field. Food was sticky rice, abundant fish (unlike today), and vegetables grown in the family's *hai*, particularly peppers. Light was from a torch made of a forest plant. Houses were of local materials and there was no tin roofing. Cooking was done with firewood brought from the *hai*.

Apparently Nai Poo did occasionally realize some money from rice surpluses and from raising silkworms. But this money was mainly put away for a rainy day, such as buying rice in the aftermath of flood or drought years, but rarely if ever spent for consumption items. The old man insists,

however, that they never lacked food, and that it was much easier to get enough to eat than today. When he says "food" he particularly means rice (the word for both in Lao is *khao*), and he emphasizes that a bag of rice was relatively cheaper then. He also had some livestock, about seven or eight buffaloes, three or four cows, and ten-fifteen chickens (no pigs) which gave the old man satisfaction.

The main activities of Nai Poo consisted of growing sticky rice in the rainy season, from April to November. During the dry season he would prepare his *hai*, mainly cutting down bushes or trees, trying to keep things fairly level. When the rains first came about April or May, he would divide his *hai* into three parts, planting cotton, peppers, and allowing space for raising silkworms. The latter activity was discontinued however, as his father grew older and refused to do all the hard work involved in climbing trees and collecting the silk.

I asked the old man why his father didn't send him to the urban French school located near Wat Sisaket. He answered that it was too far. Shortly after that the name of Phoui Sananikone (a farmer prime minister), and one of the prominent members of a rich and most powerful family, came up. What did Phoui's father do?, I asked. The old man explained that Phoui's father was just a farmer like Nai Poo. In fact Nai Pou and Phoui's father knew each other quite well. Phoui's father's rice field was quite near Nai Poo's rice field. Sometimes, when Phoui's father needed help Nai Poo would go

and work in his fields. And other times, when Nai Poo needed help, Phoui's father would come and work in Nai Poo's fields.

I asked the old man whether Phoui's father was just as poor as Nai Poo. He answered that he wasn't, because in the dry season he used to go about and trade things and made money. Why didn't Nai Poo do the same thing?, I asked. "Because it was too much work," he answered.

Phoui, the second son, as well as younger children, were sent to the French school where they studied. The first child was not interested in studying and was content to just live. (The old man seemed to approve of the latter more than the former, though just why wasn't evident.)

When the old man entered the *wat* at seventeen it was then a simple building. During the time the old man was there the number of monks varied from about two to four, with the same number of novices. The old man explained that the monk only taught him Pali, and didn't want him to study Lao because he was afraid that he would get the Pali confused. But after learning Pali and getting out of the *wat*, it was easy to learn to read Lao. The old man also learned several things about religion, particularly some prayers and the various vows that the monks had to respect. He says that he forgot most of what he learned subsequently. During most of his four years in the *wat* he served mainly as an errand-boy for the monks. When I asked him if he learned anything from this, such as how to build houses, he replied that he really didn't learn

that much, and most of what he did learn he forgot. When I asked him specifically if he hadn't learned about native medicine, he agreed that he had, mostly how to cut bark and roots off trees to be boiled but that he'd forgotten much of this as well.

I asked the old lady if she would have married if her husband had gone into the *wat*. She laughingly replied that she wouldn't have, since she wanted to marry a *thit* (former monk) or *acharm* (former monk who has achieved a basic level of study).

I asked the old man what he liked to do best before he went into the *wat*.

"Hunting big animals with a gun, like the deer whose horns you see on the wall over there." He then explained how he went out into the forest a few kilometers from the village and used to shoot all kinds of animals. Hoping to discover some of the other things he liked to do, I asked him what else he liked to do?

"Hunt other big animals like moose, wild boars, pheasants," he replied. He went on to explain how one of the biggest problems they had when he was growing up were wild elephants which used to get into the villagers' fields. The villagers sat up all night, lit fires, and shot guns to keep the elephants away. He explained that when he was a little boy he hunted for birds with slingshots. Then he used bows and arrows. Finally, when he was about fifteen or sixteen he went out hunting for bigger animals for food. He

explained that though his father often used to beat him because he was a lazy little kid when it came to looking after the buffalo, or working in the fields, he could always be counted on to go hunting. When he went into the *wat*, he of course didn't hunt anymore. He explained that it's a sin to go hunting animals, to kill anything by Buddhist precepts.

"So you didn't go hunting any more when you got out of the *wat*?" I asked.

"Oh sure I did," he replied, acting through the stalking and shooting of an animal with obvious pleasure.

What did he look for when he went to get his second wife, what kind of a girl did he want?

"A girl just like this old grandmother here" he replied a couple of times, pointing to his wife. Well, what kind of a girl was that? A girl who would follow him any place, and work together with him, and who wouldn't be lazy. Then I asked his wife what kind of a man she wanted.

"A boy who knew something, who'd been in the *wat*, who wasn't stupid, and a boy who would treat me nicely and wouldn't yell at me, just like your old grandfather here. He doesn't really yell at me very often, except every now and again and when he does I really hate him, but he's not too bad."

#### The First Child: a daughter named "Douang"

About two years after they were married, when the old man was about twenty-five, their first child was born, a daughter, whom they named "Douang".

Douang lived with them all through her childhood, never going to school. She did all the things any Lao girl would do, looking after younger siblings, cooking, washing, cleaning, and, when she got older, catching fish and working in the fields, weaving clothing. When she was about seventeen or eighteen she got married.

Her husband was a farmer from Ban Phone Thong. This settlement is about nine kilometers southeast of Ban Xa Phang Meuk. He gave the old man 800 kip for his daughter. Ordinarily, according to his daughter, the farmer should have come to live in Ban Xa Phang Meuk but the old man says that his son-in-law said that he was too poor. He only got 600-700 *meuns* of rice from his rice fields (one *meun* is about twelve kilos). But the son-in-law always got a 1000 *meun* or more from his rice fields in Phone Thong, and so he refused to come and live in Xa Phang Meuk, and took Douang off to live with him at Phone Thong. The old mother was angry, but there was nothing she could do about it.

Douang spent all of her life in Phone Thong. She died in 1965, at about the age of forty. She had eight children, seven of whom are still living. I asked the old man what she died from.

"She got sick, and her whole body was aching, and she kept getting thinner and thinner. Her sickness went on for about a year. We took her to the hospital and gave her medicine but it didn't help. Finally she died."

Around 1963 she and her husband built a little house next to the old man's. The idea was that they would live in Ban Xa Phang Meuk during the dry season, and return to farm in Phone Thong during the rainy season, but then she died, so the plan never worked.

When I asked the old man how old Douang was when she died he replied: "She was around forty. I'm really sorry she died, that I lived longer than she did. I think about her often." The oldest child of Douang is today about twenty-one.

What did he do with the 800 *kip* he got when Douang married?

"I kept it for my grandchildren." How did he spend it finally? "I bought some gold earrings for Douang's oldest girl, when she was about twelve." I asked the old man why he agreed to let Douang marry someone who would take her away to Phone Thong. Why didn't he forbid the marriage and ask her to wait for another suitor who would be willing to live in Ban Xa Phang Meuk?

"It's like this," he said, "I come to marry your daughter. I tell you, oh, please I want to marry your daughter and I'll come and live with you and work together with you. So you agree. Then I marry your daughter, and live together with you for a year or so. Then I tell you, hey, look, I want to go back to my village for a time, together with my wife. But I lie. When I take my wife back to my village, I stay there always. Do you understand now?"

"Me Thongkhoun (Thongkhoun's mother, i.e. Douang) loved

her husband more than her parents. I wasn't able to forbid her. They came and told me that they were going, they said they didn't want anything from me, not rice, nor fish, nor anything. I was really unhappy. But Me Thongkhoun loved her husband more than her parents." I asked him whether he thought that was right, whether she should have loved her parents more than her husband. "Let her love her parents more than her husband first. Let her live together with her parents until her children are big, then she can go off with her husband." How many times a year did she visit them after she left? "Only when she had business with us, a fair number of times a year."

Khamphouang, The Second Child

Khamphouang married a few years after entering the army. He has eight children, all of whom are living. He married a girl from a village near Chinamo, the army camp, about six kilometers outside of Vientiane, fifteen kilometers away from Nan Xa Phang Meuk and paid her parents about 3000 kip.

Khamphouang is the real mainstay of the family, both psychologically as well as materially. A calm, bright, cheerful man, he can always be counted on to fulfill his obligations, whether taking care of someone when they're ill, giving money to the old man for a *boun* (festival), buying extra rice when they need it, or helping a nephew find a school after he flunked his exam for the second time. The old man is very proud of Khamphouang, and really loves him. Khamphouang orders him around often but this doesn't seem to bother him.

He comes to the village about once a month at most, but this varies since he can always be counted on during an emergency. With eight children of his own, he seems harried sometimes by all the added obligations of his brothers, sisters, their spouses and children, and his old parents. He obviously has a deep affection for his parents, but, at the same time, seems perpetually exasperated by them, and rarely speaks to them in a pleasant, relaxed manner though this may just be his manner.

One morning about six months after arriving in the village, I woke up and heard the old lady moaning. I went over and saw a crowd of people on the porch. The old lady was lying there turning and crying out. It seemed that at the *boun* (festival) the night before she'd probably eaten something which had poisoned her stomach.

The *boun* had been for the old village monk who had died about a week earlier at about seventy. He'd gotten malaria and I'd taken him up to the school dispensary and they said that he should go to the hospital downtown immediately. He refused and went back to the *wat*. Some days after that he finally went downtown to Mahoset Hospital and two days after entering died and was brought back to the village in an ambulance. The body was removed before the whole village, just wrapped in a sheet, and they then began preparations for a huge memorial *boun*.

It was about nine in the morning when I came by and saw the old man squeezing ("beeping" in Lao) her body and even walking up and down on various parts of her body. They all

looked really concerned and worried, and it was obviously on everyone's mind that she was about to die. At about sixty years of age she was small and thin.

I took the old man aside and firmly said to send her to the hospital immediately! "Let's wait for Khamphouang, Me Bak Tii has gone to call him," he told me. We discussed this for some time, while I periodically reminded him about the old monk who had just died and the necessity for getting the old lady to the hospital. Every time she heard the word hospital she began shrieking that she would never go to the hospital. To go to the hospital is to die in the hospital, and the old man kept looking at me, shaking his head, as if to say, "You see, she doesn't want to go."

After about a half hour, Khamphouang pulled up in his jeep, together with his driver. He came up on the porch, saw his mother, blanched, and came over to talk to me. "Look, you've got to get her to a hospital immediately," I said.

"Well, I know, but I don't think she'll go, but if you want me to I'll ask her," he replied. "Me, do you want to go to the hospital? he went over and asked her . . . "No, to go to the hospital is to die in the hospital!" she replied.

Khamphouang came back to me, shaking his head, "You see, she doesn't want to go." "Look, I said, she has to go." I'll take her to OB where she can get special treatment, they'll take especially good care of her there because I'm an American. She's got to go. You saw what happened to the monk when he didn't go to the hospital. The same thing can happen

to your mother. We went back and forth for a half hour. Finally due to my insistence strengthening his resolve, he and a few others lifted her bodily into the car, and drove her to the hospital. When we got there she was given intravenous feeding, and she lived. The doctor said that in another hour or two she would have been dead, her blood pressure was below 70.

Khamphouang was born about three years after Doung, about 1928. He spent his very early years herding buffalo, playing, looking after siblings. But the old man is very proud of the fact that when he was eight he didn't send Khamphouang out to farm like the other boys, but rather kept him home teaching him to read. He taught him Pali rather than Lao. He explained that it was often difficult and Khamphouang sometimes wasn't interested. He often beat him, but in the end he was proficient in reading Pali.

When Khamphouang was about eleven, the old man entered him in the village *wat*, "so that he would understand right from wrong, what to do and what not to do, praying, not to kill, not to steal, not to commit adultery."

Khamphouang was in the village *wat* for a while, about a year. Then, there was fighting in Vientiane, the old man always refers to this as the "war with Thailand, when the Thais fought the French," and all the monks fled the city. A monk from Wat Ong Tu, came to live in Ban Xa Phang Meuk. There he met Khamphouang. When the fighting was over and it was time to return, he suggested to the old man that he

might take Khamphouang with him and enter him in public school at Wat Ong Tu. Khamphouang would study at the school, and live at the wat as a temple boy. The old man agreed. He suggests that if this monk had not come to live in their *wat* by accident, Khamphouang would never have gone to school.

Khamphouang then entered primary school in Vientiane and started to study about age twelve. The old man jokes that it took him years and years to finish because everytime his son started to study, there'd be another war. His schooling was interrupted twice by the entrance of the Japanese in the early forties. Then, around 1945 when the Japanese and French fought for the second time, Khamphouang had just finished fifth grade, quit school and came back to live in the village. He worked with the forestry department, in the area where the teacher training college is now. He was paid about 40 *kip* a month and lived with the old man in the village for about a year.

Then, when things were calmer, he went back downtown and entered school again, finally receiving his C.E.P. (Certificat d'Etudes Primaires) at age twenty. He then started to work in the court system, as a junior clerk, making 500 *kip* a month but was unhappy because although he'd worked over a year, there was no raise and no promotion in sight.

He then decided to be a soldier and asked the old man for permission. The old man said no, but as usual his father was overruled, and at twenty-one or twenty-two Khamphouang entered the army. He started at the same salary, 500 *kip* but

figured there was more chance for advancement. After a year or so he got a big break, and was allowed to enter the army hospital corps in which he has remained. For some fifteen years he has been in the army including three years in the fifties in Bangkok where he learned the profession of making artificial limbs. The old man is proud of his son, and emphasizes that he started learning English on his own, studying at night, working hard, and in the end he was sent on a three month trip to America and some ten other countries in 1963-64.

Khamphouang's present salary is about \$80 U.S. a month; about six months ago he paid about \$50 for a *boun* which his father holds every year at his house. Though he was obviously glad to support the *boun* for filial reasons, he emphasized to his father that he didn't have much money to spend and that this would have to suffice til next year.

#### Me Bak Tii, The Third Child

Me Bak Tii was born about 1933. She never went to school and grew up doing the same sorts of things as her sisters. Between eighteen and twenty-three she married for the first time. The old man said that he was farming rice over in Ban Na Thom at the time, failed, and didn't really give his consent to the marriage (Since the marriage failed he may say this because he doesn't want it to be said that he didn't assess the character of his son-in-law correctly). Her first husband was an army sergeant who originally came from Thakhek (in south Laos). The old man says that he was

a former monk and well-educated. He used to travel to various *wats* which is how he came to Vientiane to study and settled in Ban Xa Phang Meuk. He first lived with Me Bak Tii for a year or so in the village. He complained that it was too much trouble since he had to work in Vientiane, and took Me Bak Tii with him to live at the Phone King military camp. In these first few years their first child, Bak Tii, was born, when she was about twenty-three. The old man says that the sergeant used to "*het malamaloy*" (commit adultery), and that he wasted all his money. After about a year they moved back to Ben Xa Phang Meuk.

The old man claimed that the custom is that once a girl leaves her father's home she cannot come back to live. He thus only let them live with him temporarily until they built a new house about 100 yards away. Me Bak Tii still lives there. Over the next three to five years the sergeant went to Vientiane and presumably took a new wife. He would only visit Me Bak Tii on the weekends. Over this period three children were born, but they all died, two in infancy and one about the age of three. The old man says that they died because their father had "*peet phi*" (bad spirits). Finally, the sergeant and Me Bak Tii got an official divorce, and he hasn't been heard from since, although they learned that he has a new wife or wives and lives in Xieng Khouang but has never communicated with his son or the family. The old man dislikes him not only for not giving money to help his infants who later died but for forsaking his son

Bak Tii. They've written to him, but he's never answered.

About three years after her divorce Me Bak Tii remarried, to a Lao from northeastern Thailand, called Thit Ly (a former monk). They've had two children, Bak Hok (Hok means six, because the boy has 6 toes on his left foot) about three, and a little girl about a year. Bak Tii still lives with them, of course, and studies at the demonstration school of the teacher training college. The old man says that the only reason Bak Tii lived is that the old man took him in and helped bring him up.

Before all her children were born, Me Bak Tii used to spend much time selling, going to *bouns* and the morning market in Vientiane. During the rainy season she always helped farm rice. Now she no longer goes to *bouns*, but has opened up a little stall in the village where she sells food and drinks to passersby. Together with her husband they farm the old man's rice field in Ban Na Thom, and use his storehouse. The old man is quite fond of them, and since they're so close it's as if they were all living together. Usually Me Bak Tii, her husband, and their children eat in their own house, but the old man criticizes them for not spending their money wisely, and because he feels the husband is not strict enough with Bak Tii.

#### Me Bak Dom, The Fourth Child

Me Bak Dom was born about three years after Me Bak Tii (1936?). She also never went to school and married at about twenty. Her husband has been a peasant worker. He farms rice

in the rainy season in a field near Ban Xa Phang Meuk. This is how he met his wife. He also works in Vientiane at odd jobs, as, for example, a chauffeur during the dry season. In the first year they were married they lived with her parents in the village, and they farmed together. Afterwards the son-in-law complained that the work was too hard, and that they weren't making enough money. He said he wanted to move to Vientiane where he could earn more. They then moved into their present house in Nong Bon, about one kilometer from the That Louang monument on the outskirts of Vientiane. The husband now works as a chauffeur for a high-ranking government official. He is at his beck and call twenty-four hours a day, driving the man to work, his wife to the market, his kids to school, doing anything and everything. In return he has use of the car, which aids in times of difficulty. From what I've seen it's a good example of the *louk-nong* relationship. *Louk-nong* is usually translated as employee, but it's much more than that. *Louk* means child and *nong* means younger brother. A *louk-nong -nai* (boss) relationship involves a much stronger feeling of mutual obligation than in more technologically advanced societies. The *louk-nong* is completely at the mercy of his *nai*, does everything for him, and in return gets a degree of protection.

Me Bak Dom has had seven children, all of whom are living, the eldest in his early teens. She comes out to visit her parents once every few months, though this varies

and one time since I've come to live here (a year and a half ago) spent about a week in the village. When the old woman sleeps in Vientiane, it is often at her daughter's house.

Khamphao, The Fifth Child

He was born about 1940 and at about twelve entered the *wat* for a year. Then the old man decided to have him study and sent him to a school about two kilometers from Ban Xa Phang Meuk which had by then become a secular school. Khamphao studied there for a year or so, but was "naughty," i.e. didn't take his studies seriously. Then Khamphouang, who by now was living downtown after leaving the forestry department and was studying for his grade six primary leaving certificate, got Khamphao a place in a government primary school in Vientiane. He also arranged for Khamphao to live and sleep at the school, working as a servant for the French teacher who taught there. Thus Khamphao left home at about age twelve and, other than periodic visits, the old man really hasn't seen too much of him since. He doesn't come to visit as often as Khamphouang, nor, as far as I am aware, does he participate much in family financial and social responsibilities.

He studied for some ten years, up to the Brevet (grade ten) level. He then went to Thailand for some four years, working in the police. He is now employed by the secret police in Laos. His wife appears older. She's a divorcee with several children by her former marriage, but far more

significant is from the prominent Sananikone family and has a fair income. Apparently Khamphao's salary is supplemented by the money his wife makes from money-lending at high interest. Although this might be viewed as a status achievement for the old man, at least in western terms, for his son to marry into an important family, he never ever talks about it. I never would have known about this had I not been there once when Khamphao and his wife visited.

Nang Laa, Sixth Child

Now about twenty-four, i.e. born around 1945, she grew up in Ban Xa Phang Meuk, much as her sisters did. The principal difference was that she attended for a year or two a school run by the village monk. He taught reading and writing for a few hours in the morning and afternoon. I assume that this was under the auspices of the CREC program. Centre De Education Communautaire Rurale is a government-sponsored program to spread literacy using *wats*, monks and other literate villagers. These teachers are paid \$4-\$7 a month for their services, about one-third the salary of regular teachers.

In the early sixties a regular school opened in Ban Xa Phang Meuk. The teacher, Khampheng (about thirty) was a refugee from the town of Houei Sai (in Northwest Laos). After a few months in the village, he asked for permission to marry Nang Laa who was then about eighteen. He explained that although he already had a wife and children up at Houei Sai, he would never see them again.

The old man accepted and Nang Laa and Khampheng married. Khampheng moved into the old man's house. He now says that Khampheng was lazy and refused to do any work around the house, or at least hire someone to help with the rice farming, even if he himself was too lazy to help. Khampheng claims that he helped around the house and improved many things. In any event, Nang Laa was soon pregnant, but her baby was stillborn. At about the same time, Khampheng brought down his first wife and children, and installed them in the village. He offered to take in Nang Laa as his *mia noi* (small second wife) but she refused. They were divorced.

Nang Laa then went to Vientiane and studied sewing for two years at That Khao. She then went to Bangkok, financed by the old man and her brothers, with the hope of learning more. She had a certificate from her studies in Vientiane, but after forty-five days she returned to Vientiane. The old man says that she wasn't learning anything in Bangkok that she didn't already know, and her money was running low.

She soon moved in with Me Bak Dom in Vientiane, where she continues to live, sewing clothing on her own, and sells it in the morning market. Extremely hard-working, she sells both in the morning and, at a different market, in the afternoon. In return for living at Me Bak Dom's house, she helps to *liang louk*, (feed the seven children). The old man feels that she is doing quite well economically from her work, pointing to a hundred dollar gold belt she was able to buy. She turned down a \$30 a month job teaching sewing.

The closest of the children to her parents, she bicycles out to the village at least every week or two, often bringing food and other things. She has been promised the inheritance of her parents' house and fields when they die (in accord with Lao custom).

#### Earning a Livelihood

The old man has made a living, principally, by selling his surplus rice. He estimates that he used to get about 5-700 *meun* from his fields (one *meun* is twelve kilos), of which he would eat about 2-300 during the year and sell the rest. Mostly he sold the rice to Vietnamese who would come from Vientiane. He estimates that about 100 *meun* of rice would bring in about 1500 *kip*. One comparison that was given was that 100 *kip* would equal 30 (Thai) *baht*, valuing the sale at about \$25 (at 1969 rates). He says that he used almost all of the money for *bouns*. The money was kept at home but he had large sums stolen twice, so afterwards he would spend all his money on *bouns* shortly after acquiring it, rather than saving. The first time he had his money stolen was in the 1950's. Some soldiers came by with guns and threatened to shoot him if he didn't hand over the money; he gave them about 4000 *kip*.

The second time was much worse. He said this occurred after Phoumi's troops (right wing political forces) came back to Vientiane and drove out Kong Le (in 1960). Some soldiers again came with guns, and this time tied the old

man up to his porch, and demanded to know where the money was. They searched everywhere, but the old lady was hiding it under her leg. The old man kept insisting he didn't have any money. Finally, the soldiers said that they would kill him and began dragging him away. The old man still didn't crack, but the old woman lost her nerve and finally confessed, giving them about 10,000 *kip* . They still dragged the old man off, but let him go about half a kilometer away.

I realized how difficult it is to get any detailed information about a relatively technical subject like land tenure, because of lapses of memory, partly because of the long time span involved and the changes that took place but, nonetheless, a general picture does emerge.

Shortly after the old man married it became necessary for him to stake out his own rice paddies. Until then he'd been using the rice from his father's fields, but now that he was married it was time to have his own fields. During his early marriage years, his father's fields were divided in half, between his father and his older sister. The old man went to Ban Na Thom, about four kilometers northwest of Ban Xa Phang Meuk. He picked a hectare or two near the village. It was possible to do so because the villagers in Ban Na Thom were "too lazy to clear it themselves" He describes how he slowly and laboriously cleared the area using only a hoe.

It took a few years. First he would clear a bit, then

let water in, plough and plant it and then clear off some more. The work was too difficult for his wife. Her main function was to bring food, and help work on the rice in the cleared part. Finally, it was all cleared and every rainy season since then, until about three years ago, the old man and his wife would grow rice there. They built a small hut in the middle of the rice fields. In the very early years of their marriage they would both go and live in this hut during the rainy season, leaving their house in Ban Xa Phang Meuk vacant. Later, after children were born, the old woman would stay in Ban Xa Phang Meuk during the rainy season and the old man would live by himself in the hut. Subsequently, the old man acquired his father's rice paddies and during the rainy season he would work this and his Na Thom rice fields. He estimates that if he got 500 *meun* one year, 200 would be from the Xa Phang Meuk and 300 from the Na Thom paddies.

The most labor-intensive part was transplanting and harvesting. They couldn't do it all themselves during these periods, and they would employ day-laborers to help. Half the payment was *meu-la-meun*, (one *meun* per day of work). Of course, as their children, particularly the girls, became older, they would also help. The Na Thom rice fields are farmed today by Me Bak Tii and her husband. They share the produce with the old man and his wife. The Xa Phang Meuk rice fields are farmed by a villager with his family, and they give the old man half the yield.

Sometime in the late thirties the old man made his one attempt to go beyond his near-subsistence level. He bought a *samlaw* (pedicab) for 25 *kip*. and built a new house on the main road, which the old woman used as a stall for selling cake and alcohol. During the rainy season they continued to grow rice but during the dry season the old man drove the *samlaw* and the old woman ran the stall. The old man drove the *samlaw* for five years, and his wife ran the store for even longer, but neither project proved to be very profitable. The basic problem seemed to be small income from driving a *samlaw*. For example, the fee from downtown Vientiane to the village (nine km) was twenty *at* (100 *at* to a *kip* ). Repairing the *samlaw* ate up whatever money the old man made. There was also the factor that he wasn't working at it all through the year, only the dry season, and not even all through the dry season. He would stop when it got "too hot" and usually wound up sleeping in the village at night, driving downtown to the market early in the morning and getting back at night. I asked him why, if he wasn't making any money, he went on for five years. "*Hwai!*, it was fun going down to the market, seeing all sorts of people, talking with everyone."

After the failure of this venture the old man came back to the village and spent his dry seasons as before: fixing his tools, once in a while cutting wood for money, or for himself, visiting people, helping his wife with her vegetable garden, making baskets out of bamboo, feeding and taking

care of his buffalo.

Other than rainy season rice farming, the only other sources of cash income seem to have been from the vegetable garden and very sporadic sales of wood or bamboo baskets. They never knew how much money they got from the vegetable garden. The old woman would simply farm it during the dry season and often in the rainy season as well. Whenever there was enough to harvest and she felt like it, she would take produce to sell in the morning market. Any money gained she usually spent for food the same day.

The old man says that after his children were older and married he used to help them out from time to time with rice if they ran short. In 1964 the old man farmed his last rainy season rice. He said the reason he stopped was because his youngest daughter, Nang Laa, no longer wished to work together with him and help him with the transplanting. This basically marks his age of "retirement." At sixty-five, he fulfilled his promise and gave his Nan Thom fields to his third child, Me Bak Tii. She, together with her husband, has farmed them ever since using some hired labor. The rice is kept in the old man's storehouse and, of course, he's welcome to the use of it. The rice fields in Ban Xa Phang Meuk were farmed for a few years by one farmer, and from last year have been farmed by another. In both cases the old man received half the harvest.

Like many people in retirement, he often longs nostalgically for his working days, when he'd be out behind the

plough making noises to get the buffalo to move. He sometimes describes the great feeling of freedom he had out there in his rice fields, the fun it was to work with his buffalo, plant, transplant, harvest, when, how and if you wanted to do so. If you didn't feel like working a particular day you didn't, no questions asked.

The old man had said that he felt quite well off in the old days and had plenty of money to buy the things he wanted. I asked him why this was true and pointed out that Me Bak Tii, his third child, is farming his rice fields, getting as much yield as he, but quite obviously is just about making enough to live on. He answered that they both got about the same yield from the Na Thom rice fields, about 300 *meun* in a good year like the last rainy season. But Me Bak Tii had to pay workers. In the old man's case, however, he had enough labor, just with his family, and so could keep all 300 *meun*. He also pointed out that the cost of living is much higher today than formerly. Everything was relatively cheaper then he felt and one could do quite nicely with the money from selling a few hundred *meun* of rice.

### Religion

His major activity at present, as it has been for much of his life, is living properly gaining merit, so that he can have a better rebirth. One of the most important periods of his life was the four years he spent in the *wat*. During this time he learned Pali, and so easily was able to read

and write Lao. He became familiar with the various prayers, which he still uses constantly, and with the moral teachings of Buddhism. He gained knowledge of folk medicine and how to compute the lunar calendar. After leaving the *wat*, he continued to attend religious ceremonies as a layman, particularly the ten or so Buddhist holidays each year, and, whenever possible, the Buddhist sabbaths (8th and 15th days of the lunar month).

As he became older, his visits to the *wat* increased until when I came to the village a year and a half ago he went every day, at 8 A.M. and 12:30, to give food to the monks and lead them in prayer (except on religious holidays when more qualified laymen would lead the congregation). In addition, he would usually go over at least once or twice more each day to see how the monks were getting on and also gave material help. He also contributed labor. This close identification with the *wat* got him into some trouble with a group of villagers who claimed that he was appropriating things such as cooking pots for his own use. Although he protested vigorously that this was not true, and that when pots from the *wat* were seen at his house it was because he was cooking food for a religious ceremony. This didn't help and many villagers still believe the story. In addition to his *wat* activities, the old man works to gain merit in hundreds of other ways at his home and in the village.

Po Tou Douang is looked up to in the village as a wise

elder who has been in the *wat* and understands traditional and religious customs. He is consulted on matters such as the lunar calendar which determines when one should get married, build a new house, bury someone, take a long journey, etc. When people are sick they are sometimes brought to him and he cooks medicine, usually by boiling the bark of a particular tree, and giving the broth to the sick person to drink. He also recites the appropriate prayers, blows on them (being blown on by a religious villager with a reputation as curer is a major way in Laos for treating minor ailments like headaches and insect bites), and ties cotton strings around their wrists (to contain their souls).

He also is sometimes asked to officiate at the *baci* or *sou khouane* ceremony, which is held at any time when good luck is needed or wanted, and plays the role of the *mo phon*, (one who gives blessings), reciting prayers, and ties the first string on the wrist of the particular person being protected. A small fee is usually paid for these services but, as far as I can tell, his clientele is not very large and mainly restricted to close neighbors and members of his kin group. One factor is that he has two competitors in the village, both of whom have been in the *wat* far longer, and who were full-fledged monks (he was only a novice and then a monk for one month).

The old man's religious beliefs are a mixture of Buddhism and animism. He sees no contradiction between these two sets of concepts, they merge into a harmonious whole. There

are two basic strands, one is achieving happiness, good fortune, by gaining *boun* (merit), the other is avoiding misfortune by placating the *phi* (evil spirits).

One gains *boun* in literally thousands of ways. Most of these are related to services performed for the *wat* but many also involve things done around the house or in the village. Matters such as giving food to the monks, copying Pali tales of the life of Buddha and Buddhist scriptures onto thin bamboo leaves, attending all religious ceremonies, particularly on *Van Seen Nyai* (the "big" Buddhist Sabbath, 15th day of the lunar cycle), and the ten or so other religious holidays per year.

There is also the carrying out of the prescribed religious ceremonies contributing money, time or labor to helping to build and improve the *wat*, paying respect to the Buddha shrine in his house, and praying before it when one gets up and when one goes to sleep, as well as in the middle of the night. Meditating is also important as is the sponsorship of someone becoming a novice or monk and observing the five Buddhist commandments as much as possible. Other ways are running *bouns* in one's house to which monks come and pray (a *boun* in this sense means a religious ceremony), and attending *bouns* held at the *wat* for such "non-ceremonial" occasions as funerals. The old man has been involved in all these activities.

Placating the *phi* (the animist belief complex) to avoid

misfortune is done in a variety of ways. These activities are most apparent in times of actual or potential misfortunes. It is harder for an outsider to understand beliefs about the *phi* because unlike Buddhism they are not (formally) codified and regularized. People don't like to talk about the *phi*. Why cause any unnecessary difficulties? *Phi* beliefs are fundamentally an attempt to conceptualize the many natural problems afflicting village life. There are basically two kinds. The first are the hundreds of *phi* which are potentially dangerous, occur all about and which fairly regularly cause discomfort, pain or sickness. The second are the relatively few *phi* which inhabit every village and who are actively out to harm someone or people in general and are highly dangerous.

Some of the first kind of *phi* which the old man has told me about are those of the village, the ones inhabiting his rice fields, about his house, and in the body. The old man doesn't worry too much directly about the village *phi*. That's the responsibility of his neighbor, Po Tou Mouk, who is the official village spokesman to the village *phi*. There is a little house for the village *phi* and Po Tou Mouk periodically goes to talk with it, and put some cakes and alcohol in the house to please it and lights candles and incense. When the ammunition dump (about twelve kilometers away) was recently attacked one morning Po Tou Mouk risked his life to go to talk with the village *phi* and make offerings so that he would protect the village.

Once a year the villagers hold a *boun* in front of the village *phi*'s shrine where they sing and dance and provide the *phi* with food and drink so that he will be pleased with them.

The *phi* in the old man's rice fields are placated at the beginning of the rainy season by a ceremony in which the old man goes out with some cakes, as well as boiled chicken, and offers it to the *phi* so that they'll allow his rice to grow well. In a ceremony at the end of the rainy season the old man takes an offering to the shrine in the fields and then carries it back to his storehouse, trying to entice the *phi* into the storehouse. In both cases the boiled chicken and rice, etc. is consumed by the old man and his friends at the end of the ceremony.

Those around his house are placated officially at least once a year when the old man runs a big *boun*, inviting monks and others.

The thirty-two *phi* in his body are appeased through the *sou Khouane* (calling the soul) ceremony, which consists of reciting Buddhist prayers and tying cotton strings around the wrist. This symbolizes the tying in of the thirty-two spirits. It is when they leave one's body that one becomes sick or has psychological or emotional problems. The old man will regularly perform this ceremony when he feels sick. Though any time the same ceremony is performed, (e.g. at weddings, funerals, or when someone goes off on a long or important journey or returns, at *bouns*) the old man has

strings tied on his wrists by someone with the power to do so.

At present there are three *phi* inhabiting the village who are actively out to hurt or kill people. The first is the one inhabiting the large fish pond built some years ago by the veterinary service. Over the last three years he's "killed" three people. Recently he "killed" Ai Seeuy, a thirty-five year old farmer, who had a wife and three children, and a fourth on the way. Ai Seeuy was collecting lotus leaves for his wife to sell in the market. He fell out of his boat and was "grabbed" by the pond *phi* who "encircled" Ai Seeuy with his tentacles and dragged him under to his death. The old man, as do most of the villagers, simply avoid this *phi* by not going near the pond. The other two *phi* are presently "attacking" Me ee Sing and Me ee Deng, two middle-aged village women. Me ee Sing has been "attacked" by this *phi* for about three years. She is getting progressively sicker and weaker. The villagers say that her *phi* wants to "marry" her. Me ee Deng's *phi* has recently decided to "marry" her. Both women hold large *bouns* yearly to placate these two *phis*, make them "happy" but it is not possible to get rid of them. The old man attends these *bouns*, as do almost all of the villagers, if only so that they'll stay with their victims and not look for new ones, particularly people who didn't attend the *boun* to placate them (as for the village *phi*, this ceremony is known as *boun liang phi*, literally "ceremony to feed the *phi*")."

Both gaining *boun* and placating the *phi* are aimed at essentially the same goal: having a better life, and more important, having a happier rebirth. One of the most important things is to die naturally, and above all, not to die as a result of the activities of one of the really malevolent *phi*. For example, when Ai Seeuy died due to the pond *phi*, his body was not brought back to his house but was cremated immediately near the pond. Since he had died in this unfortunate way, he could not have the normal *boun* at his house, which would have lasted as long as his rank in life and money made possible, and would have sent him off properly into the next world.

Many of the ceremonies, for example, a *boun* held at one's house to which monk's are invited, serve to both gain merit and appease the *phi*. Contrary to expectations I've had, the old man is quite willing to talk about the *phi* and insists that he is not in the least frightened by them because "I've never done anything wrong, anything to anger them, I just live my own simple life here so why should they want to do anything to me?"

The old man's religious beliefs are very personal, and basically only involve himself and his relation to the universe. As he sees it, the quality and nature of his next birth depends entirely upon his own behavior and nothing anyone else does will have any bearing on it.

A striking example of this recently occurred. One of the old man's major *boun*-gaining activities, since I came

here, occurred some months ago when he was the sponsor of Philaa's entering the *wat*. Philaa is a man of about forty-five who has had a number of wives and various troubles throughout his life. His most recent one was when his oldest son died a year ago of an illness. The son, about eighteen, was a student at the teacher training college. Philaa decided to become a monk, for as long a time as possible, largely to try to find some calm and peace. He was an old friend of the family and had worked for many years for Khamphouang. He came to the old man and asked him to be his sponsor. The old man agreed and Philaa lived at his house for a few months, studying the initiation ceremony, some Pali, and generally helping around the house. Then the old man got some money from Khamphouang, (about \$100 in Lao *kip*) and threw a big *boun* to sponsor Philaa for the *wat*. Philaa was duly initiated and joined Nya Po Lot as the second monk. Nya Po Lot is a fifty-five year old man from a village about three kilometers away who's been a monk for about five years now, and was the only monk in the village for about nine months prior to Philaa's joining him.

Nya Po Lot and Nya Po Philaa immediately ran into conflict. I've only heard Philaa's side of it, but his complaints were that Nya Po Lot would do things like rummaging through his belongings to see if he'd stolen any money and using kerosene which someone had contributed to the *wat* through Philaa, without asking Philaa's permission.

The tension grew, the two monks rarely talked to each

other, Philaa moved out of the monk's dormitory and went to live by himself in the prayer hall. He tried at one point to move to a different *wat*, but when he asked the villagers' permission, particularly the old man and the old woman, they vociferously refused. I assume this was because he was "their" monk.

Finally, the villagers from Ban Sok came to the village looking for a monk, they had no one in their village. The old man and his wife claim that they went to Nya Po Lot and asked him. He said they should take Philaa, and without telling anyone sent them off to the head monk of the district three kilometers away to arrange matters. Early one morning a few days later, with the villagers knowing nothing about it, Philaa disappeared.

The old man and some of the other villagers, notably the village "superintendent" of the *wat* (*saravat*), a former monk and the most important man in the village, Acharn Kuu Boua, were infuriated. The old man went to see the district monk. He didn't complain directly to him, but tried to insinuate that he wasn't sure why Philaa left but maybe it had something to do with friction with Nya Po Lot. A group of villagers including the Nai Ban went to Ban Sok to try to get Philaa to come back and people spoke to Nya Po Lot. This was all to no avail. Philaa said he didn't want to come back because he didn't want to make Nya Po Lot unhappy or cause a conflict. The district monk has stayed outside of the conflict but the old man and his wife and their

clique of friends (I don't know about the other villagers) are very angry with Nya Po Lot. They blame him for being jealous, fearful of their lack of support, and of getting rid of Philaa without telling them.

Now they refuse to go to the *wat* anymore. This has astonished me because virtually the only time the old man left his house in the year and a half I've known him, other than to catch fish, was to give offerings at the *wat*. He did that twice a day, every day, plus making at least one or two other visits every single day! The *wat* was the center of his life, and now he doesn't go there at all any more. I think his wife is responsible, though I'm not sure. She is quite vociferous about her distaste for Nya Po Lot, and has explained to me that she still gives offerings to the Buddha every day at her house, but she'll be damned if she'll have anything to do with Nya Po Lot. The old man doesn't talk about it at all, but the fact remains he doesn't go to the *wat* anymore.

Considering the attention he's given to gaining *boun* by *wat*-related activities all his life, one can only conclude that the *wat* is not central to gaining *boun* for him, and that, if necessary, he can perform rituals at home. He mentioned that when younger he didn't go to the *wat* nearly as often, because he had to work (the expression used is *haa keen* ("look for things to eat")), but that whenever possible he would go on the *van seen* (sabbaths).

Another striking example of the village belief that each

man is responsible for his own salvation, and that he need not worry about others, occurred a few months ago. An old blind man died in the village. They had a three day *boun* prior to the cremation. At these *bouns* people usually sleep where it is held, passing time drinking, dancing, singing, and, above all, playing cards and dice for money. I went over on the afternoon of the cremation. The brightly decorated coffin was off to one side of the house where the *boun* was being celebrated, the monks came, and began chanting their prayers. The people near the coffin bowed down reverently making the praying gesture (*vai* , palms pressed in front of the chest), and as the monks began chanting softly, I was amazed to hear a lot of noise nearby. I turned and saw that at least half the "mourners" continuing to play cards and dice, drinking, and cursing at the top of their lungs (the basic curse is *híl me*, or "your mother's vagina"). They were undeterred by the fact that the monks were chanting and that the man they had come to mourn was about to be cremated. I felt this to be a striking illustration of the fact that each person felt a responsibility only for himself. None of the mourners, or the monks, felt any need to tell the card-players to be quiet.

### Politics

Po Tou Douang is apolitical. Not in the sense that he doesn't care about political questions, he does, but he perceives there is nothing he can do and so objectively, in

terms of his behavior, he is apolitical.

He doesn't care much for the Royal Lao government and resents its elitism and corruption. More specifically, he's completely opposed to paying taxes, or volunteering labor. He resents what he considers to be travel restrictions on citizens, and the fact that the district officers and their deputies treat villagers with indifference, as well as the money spent on royalty. He resents the soldiers when they bother the villagers.

But at the same time, he is quite authentically anti-Pathet Lao and prefers the Royal Lao to them. He seems afraid and often mentions the fact that he feels they would force the villagers to work on all sorts of projects. I am skeptical. He obviously is afraid of the Royal Lao and perhaps of me as an American. But after a year and a half I've come to the conclusion that he is indeed anti-Pathet Lao. One reason is that he depends on his son emotionally and materially and thus has a stake in the present system. Another is the terrorist attacks about which he hears from time to time. Another is the constant radio propaganda against the Pathet Lao which he repeats word for word any time he is questioned on the subject directly. And, of course, in general terms the Pathet Lao do indeed threaten traditional ways and thus the psychic bases of his life.

The Thai, French, Japanese, and Chinese attacks on Laos more or less passed him by. He rarely mentions them.

They had little direct impact upon him. But he is quite openly anti-Phoumi (Phoumi Nosarian, the rightist military and political leader) and a bit more discreetly pro-Kong Le (a junior officier who led a short lived coup in 1960). The only political question I've ever heard him openly outspoken about was Phoumi's attack on Vientiane when he drove Kong Le out. Not only did he scare the old man to death with cannon which were shooting over the village, and wounding people in other villages, but he drove Kong Le out. The old man sees Kong Le as a true savior who really had the villagers' interests at heart and in addition was possessed of supernatural powers.

#### Place in Society, How Others See Him

The village has no resident government officials (other than the chief of the veterinary station and the schoolteacher, both live on the outskirts of the village) of any rank. There are some sixty-nine houses. Of the men, perhaps half grew up in Northeastern Thailand, another quarter to a third were from other places in Laos. A higher percentage of the women were born in the village, or came here at an early age, since the pattern is for the man to marry into the woman's family, and farm the lands she has inherited. As a result, the old man is one of the few people who actually grew up in the village and, I believe, the eldest.

Economically, the old man is rather comfortable. This is both a function of his having retained his rice fields,

and help he's gotten from his children living in Vientiane, particularly Khamphouang. This latter help is most evident in his house, which has cement foundations, is rather large, and one of the three or four best houses in the village. Part of the money for this came from his children. I should also mention that he has one of the best rice storehouses in the village. Though he is well off, this is only in relation to the other villagers. He has little or no cash on hand, and the value of his possessions is probably no more than that of the highest fourth of village households', particularly when it is remembered that he only has two water buffalo.

The village is divided into two factions. One coalesces around the two brothers who are the *nai ban* and former village monk, named Acharn Kuu Bona, the latter having the most respect. The other faction, residing on the other side of the road, coalesces around Acharn Saa, also a former monk, though for perhaps only five to ten years as opposed to the other's twenty years. He originally came from Northeast Thailand, but married the daughter of a family based in the village. The old man is definitely part of the first faction by virtue of the fact that this group includes the offspring of the three men who originally founded the village, and his location about 300 yards from the *nai ban's* house, near the *wat*.

The old man, despite a degree of respect from members of his faction, and being consulted by them for healing and ritual functions, is probably resented as a close ally of the

*nai ban*, against whom many have grievances. But even among members of his faction, and kin, he does not seem particularly popular. I judge this by the fact that almost no members of the original families of the village visit him regularly. This could also be, however, because of his wife who has a bitter tongue and no inhibitions about using it.

He does, however, have some close friends who visit him regularly. Most of these come from outside the village. His most constant visitor is a fifty-year old man who originally comes from Savannakhet. He is a handsome former soldier who has had numerous wives and children (his present wife and a child live with him). He spends most of his daylight hours on the old man's porch, just sitting, sleeping, talking, almost never eating. He is a pleasant person, very bright and aware and enjoyable to talk to. Other friends include a Bangkok Thai who moved here about twenty years ago and is prosperous from construction work in Vientiane. An impotent former monk who is now a farmer, he married a divorcee here after his second or third marriage and has marital conflicts. Now about forty-five, he is assistant *nai ban*. There is also a woman from outside the village who is his "adopted" daughter. She has three or four children, the first two by a Vietnamese soldier who took her to Vietnam, then jilted her. She then married a Lao who either died or divorced her and now lives alone with her children.

The house is usually pretty empty in the evenings,

though during the afternoons there's almost always a few people. Once in a while the house really fills up, during which time the old man is at his happiest.

None of three young Lao whom I knew fairly well like the old man. Chaleum, a girl, finds him rude and vulgar, when she visited me he implied all sorts of things to her and made her feel extremely uncomfortable. She was particularly infuriated at his joking in front of both of us that I should marry her and his repeating it a number of times after I'd clearly indicated I wished he'd say no more. Khamphong, a man I worked with and who ate lunch with me and the old man for about six months, didn't like him either. The major complaint I heard was that he kept repeating things and didn't have a good heart.

#### Personality - An Individual Interpretation

The old man is basically a traditionalist. One of the most striking things about the old man is the extent to which he emotionally "holds on" to things and yet practically one by one he has lost them. His attachment to his material belongings is, to me, extraordinary. The story of the time the soldiers were dragging him off to his death and he still wouldn't tell them where his money was is symbolic. So was the time I borrowed a little bowl to carry some meat back to my house. I forgot to bring it back for a few days, and each meal he would inquire anxiously about it. He didn't need it, and yet his words and expressions indicated that it had a greater emotional importance to him than its

actual worth justified. His dissatisfaction with Khamsing's living with him, his constant rummaging through my garbage, and a thousand other things illustrate the point.

At the same time, most of the things he's had or wanted have been either lost or eluded him. His attempts to make money by driving a *samlaw* failed. One by one almost all his children have left. He often talks about the fact that not only all of his brothers and sisters, but all of his friends and contemporaries have died. He often complains about the fact that younger people think they know it all and don't respect the opinions of the old people who really know what they are talking about.

It's clear that although he does not crave the political power of a *nai ban*, he does want the sort of moral authority and respect of a village elder, and yet that's eluded him also. The security and comfort he'd always hoped for in his last years have also not been really achieved. His failure to get the pond back from Nai Peng still rankles twenty years later.

This propensity for "holding on to more than just material things" is strikingly illustrated in many ways. In the year and a half I've known him he's gone to Vientiane only two times. The furthest I've otherwise known him to go from his house is three kilometers, by foot. Although he says this is due to his not wanting to let his wife to sleep alone, or to leave the house unguarded when she's not there, this is clearly only partially true. He could go downtown by day and, if he wanted to, sleep downtown. He could ask

someone else to sleep in the house to watch over his wife. She often sleeps apart from him when he goes to *bouns* and visits her family. And he could also get someone to guard his house if he wished.

His tremendous attachment to the *wat*, willingness to give money to it, going there at least two or three times a day until recently, and general attachment to Buddhism are illustrations.

One day when his little grandson, who used to live with them, left when the old woman wanted the child to help around the house, the old man tied up the boy to a post by a chain and had him sit there a few hours. This sort of thing, as well as his constant criticisms of the boy's parents for not disciplining him properly, are also illustrations of this desire to cling to the past, tradition, the shreds of his authority.

#### Some Concluding Thoughts

As striking as is his clinging to things lost is his capacity to enjoy what he has left. The word "spontaneity" comes to mind, a mental trait which allows him to interact with the present as if there was no past or future. The old man's children have left him and that's past, except when something directly happens to remind him of it. He doesn't think about it and he is not driven to worry about it by an external set of values about how parents or children should really act. The fact that his children have left him does not directly impinge upon his consciousness and enjoyment

of the present. The old man has a full and active life which gives him a good deal of satisfaction.

All of the many activities he engages in: catching fish, weaving baskets, writing Pali verses, gaining merit through *wat*-related activities, fetching water, cutting firewood, taking his buffalo to water, and caring for them, officiating at household religious ceremonies, overseeing farming activities, cooking, praying are expressions of an integrated way of life in which he fully participates. His deep feeling for his wife and his satisfaction in his children's success and security, particularly Khamphouang's, are also basic components of his having come to terms with life. So somehow he manages to be on the whole a cheerful and satisfied man, while at the same time having real bitteresses and frustrations.