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Social Fabric, Education and HIV Vulnerability
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Foreword

In November-December 2001, I was able to conduct a field inquiry in a Lanten Yao village of Muang Long district, Luang Namtha Province, Lao PDR. I had been commissioned by the project *Development and Testing of a GIS-Linked Sentinel Surveillance System and Data Base on the Trafficking of Girls and Women in the Upper Mekong Sub-region (RAS/98/H01) under the UN Inter-Agency Agreement and under close supervision of the UNESCO Regional Advisor for Culture in Asia and the Pacific*, with the following instructions:

2. This research will be preparatory to the regional expansion of the GIS-Linked Social Sentinel Surveillance Project, and will begin the process of ascertaining the cross-border links and trade routes in the key Luang Namtha region.
3. The objectives of this research will be:

   - To ascertain and analyze Lanten patterns of mobility and trade, in particular connections to China, in preparation for the expansion of the GIS-Linked Social Sentinel Surveillance to the Lao-China Border.
   - To gather information on Lanten concepts of the origins, etiology, transmission mechanisms and prevention of disease, as these apply to HIV/AIDS. In particular, it is important to isolate local conceptions of risk factors.

   Focus of the research will also be to ascertain whether prevention materials developed for Yao (in the Yao language) in Thailand can be adapted for Lanten in Lao PDR.

Thanks to the positive and speedy support of Lao officials taking part in this project, Mr. Heng Daoavannary, Mr. Bounkhong Thoummavong and Mr. Hongthong Phouangphachan, I was soon in Ban Pa Kha, the Lanten Yao village selected for the Luang Namtha HIV/AIDS Project. Using ethnographic methodology to undertake focused research in a society which has never been scientifically studied before in Laos or anywhere else, is attempting the impossible. I discovered from the first day that I could not even rely on the field notes of Laurent Chazée (1999: 105-128) who worked in this area as an agricultural development engineer as early as 1992, when he had the neighboring Lanten village of Ban Ta Fak associated to the Nam Tiu irrigated agriculture assisted development project (1994-1999). Although Pa Kha villagers still remember him as the first Frenchman they ever met, they do not recognize the few hints of their social and religious life he has gleaned during his stay. Everything was to be checked or, better, restudied again. This is why I first came with a house-by-house inquiry of the population, residence pattern, household economy, kin system and religion the traditional way the field anthropologists do. The villagers were amazingly
eager to cooperate and willingly invited me to attend two major memorials for the salvation of the dead, one in Pa Kha, the other in Ta Fak, where the Pa Kha priests had been invited to lead the ritual. I took this opportunity to check my findings in Pa Kha and did a shorter complementary investigation of Ta Fak at the same time I was watching once more the same ritual.

The first draft of my findings in this report can be used, I hope, as a foundation work for approaching the social and economic facts of this particular Lanten Yao group which calls oneself Kim Di Mun and has built its own cultural frontier around this autonym, excluding other Lanten Yao as well. After 1975, the Lao Communist cadres distinguished them as Lao Huay, “Lao of the brooks”, and they did not object this new -- but fortunately discriminating--exonym. At least, it did acknowledge their peculiarities, linking them moreover to their favorite econiche.

Back to focused research, I was soon to find the disappointing fact that in Pa Kha, traditional healing techniques by the plants and the concepts of the origin, etiology and transmission of disease had been dropped already since the opening of the Muang Long hospital distant only 3,5 km. from their village. They were much more interested in Western medicine and readily consulted me for all kind of health disorders. I could not find any trace of a theory about STD corresponding to Lao or Chinese traditional STD dialectics. Of AIDS, they all know what has been explained to them during prevention campaigns and they can see quite explicit illustrated posters at school and at the schoolteacher’s home, brought in by the Education Division of the District. The young male adults also enjoy very much the volleyball and tako nets they have been offered by the same in the name of the UNESCO project. They have all attended evening Lao language and writing lessons provided to them by the schoolteacher’s wife, an educator from the French NGO ESF (Ecole Sans Frontières), and can check now their family registration book and the land deeds they have been recently provided with. They also have constructed their own response to risk factors, relying on their strongly knitted social fabric and their consciousness of being a small number.

Their mobility as occasional wayfarer is contrasted by their truly ancient settlement and rarely takes them any further than Luang Namtha or Muang Sing and they seem to always travel from one to another of their Kim Di Mun villages, that is in a range of well-known social space. They sometimes go to Meng Mang, in China (25 km. from the border), an area once inhabited by their own grandparents, to buy electronic equipment. But they would not venture any farther. Trade across border is more likely to be monitored by intermediaries like the Lue. The mobility of other Lanten Yao groups from Laos or China visiting the village remains an open question, but implies a longer stay at time of big communal meetings like Chinese New Year in order to be correctly studied.

Finally, looking at the language issue, prevention materials developed in Thailand in Mien Yao language, certainly a kin idiom some of them can understand but say they lost the habit of speaking, can be used. But it should definitely be delivered in oral form on cassettes, the Ministry of Education strictly forbidding resorting to any other script than the Lao one.

I feel very grateful to have done this study under the sponsorship of UNIAP and UNESCO/PROAP. It has given me for the first time in decades the opportunity to renew with traditional fieldwork that is always the sympathetic and discrete encounter of a lone anthropologist and an anonymous village community, a tantalizing human adventure for both, somehow.
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In the Nam Ma valley, Muang Long District, Luang Namtha Province, there are three Lanten Yao villages stretching on both sides of the river, along the road from Muang Sing to Xieng Kok. The first two, Ban Pa Kha and Ban Ta Fak are about 3.5 km distant from the district, the last one, Ban Pang An, laying a little further, at km 8. Their total population amounts to 437 inhabitants, 186 in Pa Kha, 95 in Ta Fak, 156 in Pang An. These three villages are much interrelated and rather far away from the main bulk of the Lanten settlements around Luang Namtha. They constitute a demographic isolate of a sort and should be watched as such, especially because they have been in the area for much longer than most other groups. Pa Kha, according to its inhabitants is about 90 years old. Ta Fak, visited by Laurent Chazée (1999: 110) in 1994, had a population of 82 at that time and is nearly 80 years old. Pang An’s name is the only one to be found on 1982 maps in spite of being the latest of the three Mun settlements. These people coming from nearby Huay Thu moved in this beautiful location in 1973 only and, after more than a decade of swidden farming, started making irrigated rice fields in 1989. According to local agents, Ban Pa Kha, the only Lanten village incorporated in the program of UNESCO/PROAP, is certainly the most developed of the three. Its proximity from the main road has brought to the village various development agencies with the result it now has a good network of fountains bringing water from the Huay Kaeo, a brooklet running along the village (see the map) at close distance of the houses. There are six of them installed by NCA1, and two others from Action Contre la Faim. This contrasts sharply with Ban Ta Fak, for instance, where women have to fetch water directly from the Huay Ta Fak. Pa Kha has also been offered a school and a schoolteacher by NCA. Most villagers have been provided by NCA with a toilet pan and now use a small thatched toilet hut. NCA is giving herbal medicine to a few of them who have decided to stop smoking opium. Finally, another NGO, taking care of orphans, has recently distributed a couple of bicycles in the village. Some men can use them instead of walking to Muang Long or Pang An. Women keep going on foot in groups of four, five, when they want to visit the market.

This study has focused on Pa Kha, with a four-day visit of Ta Fak, on the other side of the Nam Ma River.

1. Who are the Lanten Yao?

Lanten is a southern pronunciation of the standard Chinese word Landian that has become the usual ethnonym for the Mun group of Yao in China. Nguyễn Duy Thiệu (1996)2 has provided another reading (Lenetene), which is completely misleading and utterly unfounded. For instance, Dang Nguyễn Van et al. (1953: 151) wrote the word Làn Tiên that is correct. Mun Yao are today to be found in three provinces of China: Hainan (Sanya), where they are known as Miao, in Guangxi (Shiwan Dashan, Jinxu, Baisi, Lingyun, Ninning, Fangcheng, Shizong,  

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1 Norwegian Church Agency, which has a heavy implantation in Muang Long, concentrating on development and eradication of drug addiction.
2 Câu Trúc Tộc Nguộì ở Lào (Ethnic Structure of Laos) Hanoi, Social Sciences Publisher. It must be an innovation from this often careless, author for Dang Nguyễn Van, Chu Thái Số’n et Lu’u Hùng, Ethnic Minorities in Vietnam, Hanoi 1993, The Gioi Publishers, p151, have a correct spelling: Lân Tiên, referring obviously to the Chinese pronunciation of this name.
Napo, Bama, Tianlin, Shangsi, etc.), and in Yunnan (Funing, Guangnan, Bingbian, Maguan, Yenshan, Malipo, Hekou, Jinping, Jiangcheng, Mojiang, Meng La, Yiwu etc.); in Vietnam, they are extending their numerous subgroups from Quang Ninh to Lai Chau on all the Northern provinces; in Laos they only are in the provinces of Phongsaly, Oudomxai, Luang Namtha and Bokeo. The 1995 Census records 22,695 Yao. On this number, the Mun Yao should be at least some 10,000. They further divide into two groups: *Kim Di Mun* “at the mountain foot” and *Kim Diang Mun* “at the mountain top”. The former is to be found in Bokeo, Luang Namtha and Oudomxai provinces, the latter is living in Phongsaly. According to Laurent Chazée (1999: 108), there were some 4,500 Kim Di Mun in Luang Namtha, Bokeo and Oudomxai in 1995. The *Kim Di Mun* say the Pathet Lao has called them Lao Huay after 1975. And now they seem more familiar with this ethnic name than with Lanten, which they also know but seldom use for themselves. Lao Huay has a certain factual flavor considering that they like to live by a mountain brook. Even if this feature is not uncommon among other ethnic groups, as far as it links to their favorite ecological niche, it provides them, I guess, with a measure of sustainable identity.

2. The Lanten --Lao Huay of Muang Long and the outside world

They are comparatively an ancient population in the district. Those of Ta Fak remember the history of the neighboring Lue village, Ban Nong Kham, which was established well after their own. They themselves recall their coming from China through Hekou in Yunnan and Lao Cai in Vietnam on the Red River, then their crossing the province of Lai Chau in the direction of Dien Bien Phu and from there into the south of the province of Phongsaly in Laos through Muang Khua and the Nam Nga river, down to Oudomxai where they still have villages in Namo district, before entering the plain of Luang Namtha. They had their villages in the plain at the arrival of the Tai Dam in 1894, who outnumbered them and forced them to retreat on the outskirts. Only a few of them headed to Muang Sing, then down to the Nam Ma valley. During the Civil War in the 60’s, others went as far as Bokeo. In short, the whole group of Namtha and Bokeo is completely homogenous. This explains that a few in-marrying spouses come from villages as far as Nam Tavan on the road from Namtha to Oudomxai, or Nam Nyong in Bokeo and that some have moved to settle there. Chinese Lanten Yao also visit them and they acknowledge the group of Jinping as sharing a common origin, but find the Lanten of Meng La quite different albeit very impressive when the former visited them with beautiful costumes and a rich lore of love songs. Moreover they want to be distinguished from the Lanten of Phongsaly whom they call *kao san* “High Mountain” in Chinese, *kim*
diang mun in their own language. They rather fear nearby Myanmar where “one is first beaten by the police before being able to show his Lao identity papers”, and seldom cross the Mekong river at Xieng Kok to visit it. They go to Xieng Kok anyway because, there, they can order equipment from China, like power driven cultivators from the local Tai Lue (especially from Xieng Lap, upstream). A 8 hp, two-wheel tractor with all the cultivation equipment can be exchanged there against two buffaloes. Some of them go directly to China through Muong Sing. Meng Mang, half way to Meng La, seems to be a good place for buying Hi Fi, TV sets, VCD players and the like.

The outside world is also represented by all those who come to the village almost every day: Lue men and women buying or selling all sorts of goods, from rice to bamboo shafts. And, once a year maybe, Lue buffaloes’ merchants also come to buy buffaloes and send them to Northern Thailand through Xieng Kok. Kui Sung, their immediate neighbors in the relocated village of Phonsamphan, on the way to Pang An, pass on the road but are very rarely seen in the village. Opium addicts, however, come or even settle in the village like this Kui Long widower who has sold his five-year-old son in adoption to Ta Ton (N° 11) and then joined his son’s new family. Last but not least, the school teacher, a Tai Dam from Ban Pong in Luang Namtha, married with a 18-year-old Tai Khao from Ban Fieng Ngam who has just given birth to a daughter. Both husband and wife teach. He teaches children in daytime and she teaches adults, men and women together, in the evening. In 1998, NCA built the school, large enough to accommodate the children of the village. But it is still missing latrines for the pupils. Four, five teachers have come and left, one after the other. The last one was dismissed after having found consuming ya ba (amphetamine). The actual teacher (23 years old) is the only one who decided to stay for good. He first came in 2000 after teaching for one month in a mountain village of Xieng Kok, which he found too hard to live in. When he settled in Pa Kha, his wife came to stay with him and was commissioned for teaching adults by Ecole Sans Frontières, another French NGO she had already worked for in Luang Namtha. Her husband is paid by NCA. Starting from 2001, he has opened two grades: first grade, from 6 to 12, second grade, from 12 to 16. His salary has passed from 85,000 kips a month to 124,000. He teaches on daytime, and his wife from 7 to 9 in the evening. 26 women and 9 men over 40 are attending her classes. She gets 95,000 kips from ESF. Their two salaries amounting to 219,000 kips would not be enough to make a living downtown. At the village, they get free rice and the villagers have helped them building their house. They can make it. They have a tiny vegetable garden, but no fowl. Both of them have been instrumental in teaching simple notions of HIV/AIDS and they have, both in their house and at school, permanent posters produced by the Ministry of Education in Vientiane (Non-Formal Education Division). My discussions with villagers prove that they are quite informed of the theory, but have never encountered the disease among fellow villagers or in their visits to the outside world. A very striking detail is that they all acknowledge that the use of condom is a guaranty for safe sex (a much more straightforward statement than the Lao would have), and they also know that they can get free condoms at the hospital in Muang Long. But nobody goes and asks for them. In my debriefing with Mr. Houmphanh Chantavong, Muang Long director of the Non-Formal Education bureau who is the local agent for the UNESCO Program, I have suggested that a number of condoms should be brought in the village and left in the custody of the headman or the school teacher, maybe both. One cannot imagine anyone with an opportunity of casual sex running to Muang Long to get a condom first. The villagers’ reasoning is that, being already a small group, they are sensitive to this problem and are not tempted to have sex with strangers to the village, so there is little chance -- in their mind -- that HIV/AIDS could get access to their community. On this point, I shall elaborate in my conclusion.
3. The lessons of a particular social fabric

Pa Kha is a medium-size village laying on a gentle slope at the foot of a hill leading to a series of mountain tops culminating at 1049 m. and 1751 m, wherefrom comes the brook Huay Kaeo, sometimes named Huay Pak Na “the brook at the mouth of the rice fields” by the villagers. The village, its swiddens and rice fields, are all situated on the left side of the Nam Ma; on the right side, it faces the territory and rice fields of Ta Fak, a sister hamlet. But crossing the Nam Ma, narrow and deep at this point, is hazardous. Some Ta Fak’s villager has drowned while attempting to do it. Others have to go through Nongkham and cross the river on the makeshift bamboo bridge the Lue have built upriver. Needless to say, this bridge is carried away by the tumultuous waters of the rainy season and Ta Fak is then cut off from Pa Kha. The name Pa Kha (‘Imperata cylindrica forest’) is today misleading. This grass has disappeared from the village immediate surroundings, supplanted by a more vigorous Eupatorium odoriferum. An appropriate name should be Pa Nha Falang, indeed. In Mun language, the villagers call the place Gan Diang, written with the Chinese characters Mao Lin zun, “Village in the forest of cogon grass”, a translation of the Lao name. Obviously, this place’s name preexisted their coming in.

The new national earth road crosses the territory of Pa Kha to Xieng Kok. Despite the fact that the transportation of goods from and to Xieng Kok brings everyday at least a score of big ten-wheel lorries, they never stop at Pa Kha or anywhere else on their way to Muang Sing and so do the few private or tourist company cars that run on that road. Only service vehicles or pickup and buses may take an occasional traveler. There is no tourist exploitation of this village, which lays about 300 meters away from the road. When they go to their rice fields or to their vegetables gardens near the Nam Ma, villagers must first walk along the road. But their very authentic costume has not attracted any attention yet.

Pa Kha has 30 houses but is accounted for 33 roofs in the inquiry conducted by the Office of Education of Muang Long on the 14/09/2001,. The difference between the number of actual houses and the number of roofs, indicated by the villagers themselves, is due to the presence in the village of three double houses. A kim di mun double – and sometimes triple – house is constituted of two (or three) distinct families deciding to live together under one roof. It does not mean that they mix up or share a common economy. They only place their houses side-by-side, front and rear wall joined together, without partition wall. It has the aspect of a long house somehow, but a closer look shows that the internal arrangement of these twin houses is exactly the same as in any ordinary single house. Laurent Chazée (1999: 107) tried to find a scientific descriptive word for this kind of housing and came up with a pseudo-biological term ‘polynuclear houses’ (sometimes, as in p.119, plurinucleous versus mononucleous). Needless to say, this pseudo-scientific terminology does not fit the anthropological fact and should be avoided as misleading3. The correct term is a “double (or triple or multiple) house” sheltering two (or three or more) separate households. Pa Kha offers a sample of three double houses and it is interesting to compare the reasons advocated by their inhabitants for setting them up.

In house N°1 (see Map 2), we find today two families, one of the Lo clan, the other of the Li clan. The building of a double house was engineered by two sisters some 36 years ago, around 1965. The elder one had married a Lo and his younger sister a Li. The Lo husband died in 1970, the younger sister in 1981 and the elder sister in 1993. She maintained the double -- Lo and Li – house together with her sister’s husband who was the last survivor until 1996. Their children inheriting the double house have so far kept this habit of living under the same roof.

3 Particularly, because referring to the structure of a cell, these terms imply that there is a single household shared by two distinct families, which is wrong, in this case.
In house №10, a Tang and a Li family also share the same roof. There is no kinship ties but friendship between the two promoters: Ta Ton (55) and Ta Chay (49), notwithstanding the fact that their two wives were both of the same age, both born in 1959. Both families having to build a house, they decided to join resources and set a double house instead of two. In house №12, finally, we meet a more conventional circumstance: the eldest son, Ta Ton, of Ta Ngaeng, a Li, has decided to set up a separate household and has reorganized his father’s house into a double house with separate fireplaces and bedrooms like in the other double houses. But he is not satisfied anymore living under the same roof as his father and should move very soon to his own house when it is ready.

If the last case reminds the China-expert anthropologist of a well-known process for splitting households among the Chinese, the first two are rather unusual and may be considered, as
Chazée does, as an original cultural feature of the Kim Di Mun. A rational explanation of the choice of living in a double house may well be the search for safety. An ordinary single house has to be let alone, door closed, from time to time when the family is working in the fields. With a double house there is always the chance of having someone staying around to watch the place for both families.

The other differing figures between the Education inquiry in September and mine in December is the number of families, amounting to 42 in the Education inquiry. Of course, this is due to an addition of all the married couples under the same roof and their nuclear families ignoring the fact that they share the same household and extended family. Instead of “families”, this should be called what it is: “number of married couples (or nuclear families)”. But the latter may also be misleading. The real number of real families is the same as for the roofs: 33.

Finally, the total population of the village in my inquiry is 184 versus 197 in the Education inquiry. This is partly due to the very recent suicide of Sa Xim, 29, the wife of Ta Ngaeng’s second son. However, having found a few new-born babies who could not be accounted in last September, there must have been quite a few infant or adult deaths between both inquiries, or let’s say, the Education inquiry has been made with the village headman and has not been cross-checked house by house.

At first glance, Pa Kha’s population appears as young and healthy. The bodies are strong and sturdy. The rare old people are slender and spry. The diagram representing the population by age groups and genders shows another story.

**Diagram 1: The population of Ban Pa Kha by five-year age-groups in December 2001**

Women, with one exception who is 66 and a twenty-year widow, seldom live over 55, but there are 8 men from 50 to 60 and a 66-year old man. Again, in the group 45/50, there are 3 men against 2 women, but in the 40/45 group, the gender ratio is 9 women against 5 men and in the 35/40 and 30/35, they also slightly (5 to 4 – 9 to 7) outnumber men. The proportion is
heavily reverted in favor of men in the groups 20/25, 25/30 (10 to 13 – 3 to 6), indicating a depletion of young women at the age of marriage. Many young men have married older women or widows and men usually avoid divorce, considering, they say, the scarcity of marriageable women. The courting age 15/20 shows the young women more numerous but some of them will marry out of the village or to elder men. It is quite striking to see that with an equal number of male and female babies and infants, the female generation of 5/10 shows a stronger resistance to infantile diseases (18 to 13), then is suddenly depleted, between 10 and 15 (5 to 9). When turning to the family structure, the story of this population becomes clearer. There are 33 natural families in Pa Kha, with an average rate of 5,63 members per family. Pang An, with 27 families and a rate of 5,77 members per family, and Ta Fak with 16 families and a rate of 5,97, have a slightly higher house rate. The families in Pa Kha divide into nuclear and extended families. There are 18 nuclear families against 15 extended families, usually consisting of only two couples with their children. A rare N° 5 has three married couples under the same roof. The extended families are for the most settled uphill while the nuclear families are more or less regrouped downhill, closer to the road and on flat land, some having come recently. Their houses are smaller and traditionally on dirt, with a thatched roof and plaited bamboo walls. Among them, there are several households, which are not self-sufficient in rice. Parents and children are often young; some couples have just come out from an extended family and established themselves alone.

At marriage, a young couple has a choice of residence. They can stay indefinitely with the wife’s parents, or spend a period of one to three years of groom service and then go back to the house of the husband’s parents, or finally settle alone in a new house. This arrangement is negotiated before marriage and influences the amount of the bride price (14 Indochina piastres as an average). Naturally, if the son-in-law stays at his wife’s house for the rest of his life, the bride price is very light; and it is reversibly more important when he wants to take his wife back home. The longer he serves as a son-in-law at his parents-in-law, the lesser he has to pay. This makes the pattern of residence more complicated, but the ideology of inheritance is nevertheless patrilineal because of traditional ancestor worship in a Chinese style. Sometimes, however, it falls to a son-in-law. Marriage is usually concluded inside the group of these three villages of Muang Long district, but wives are sometimes fetched from as far as Nam Nyong in Bokoe province or Nam Di close to Luang Namtha and some of the villagers’ daughters may also go that far.

Extended families are in fact more or less stem families, one young married couple being trained to take over from the parents who gradually pass on them their duties in the fields and the village. When inquiring about houses, there is sometimes an hesitation on the name of the head of the house. For instance at N° 2, the head was first designated as Ta Ton the son, 27, then as his father, Ta Yot, 56. Ta Yot later said to me that he no longer bothers planting rice, letting this burden to his son and daughter-in-law. 56 is close to the maximum life expectancy for men and, even being in quite good health, Ta Yot is already retiring. Women’s life expectancy is still lower than men’s. Among the senior generation of both genders, remarried widows and widowers are plenty. The basic rule is that a widow or a widower can remarry only three weeks after the funeral of his (her) deceased spouse. A non-systematic survey of Pa Kha shows at least 7 widowers (6 in the senior generation, one young adult) against 5 widows, among whom only one, aged 66 now, did not remarry.

Remarriage custom enables a remarrying widow to take her orphaned children along with her in her new household. This produces a kind of reconstructed family of in-laws, amplifying, somehow, the potential conflicts between inmates inside large extended families. For example, Ta Ngaeng (N°12), 55 now, first married Sa Paen who gave him his first two sons, Ta Ton and Ta Gam and died, aged 37. He then married a widow, Sa Kun, who brought to him her orphan daughter, Sa Hun, aged 16 now, then died, aged 28, while giving birth to Sa
La, 7 now. Ta Ngaeng then took another widow, Sa Ngim, now 45, who brought her boy, Ta Tip, now 17 and gave him Sa Raeng, now 4. His eldest son from his first wife, Ta Ton, 34, married Sa Nyo, now 31, who gave him one daughter and two sons. He established a separate household on the pattern of a double house with his father, but is now preparing to go and live alone with his nuclear family. The second son, 28 now, married Sa Xim, 29 at her death a couple of weeks ago, with whom he took into custody his younger brother, Ta Tuy. They then got two daughters, Sa La and Sa Pey. This complicate family framework may have generated conflicts between women, especially between Sa Xim, Sa Ngim and Sa Hun, these ‘second ranking’ mother- and sister-in-law. Upon a reproach of being lazy to share chores from her young sister-in-law Sa Hun, Sa Xim first sought the support of her husband. But Ta Gam’s answer, wanting to be conciliating, sounded to her like another reproach leading her to think he might want to divorce her. She went to pick up a poisonous plant, satyeo yai, growing in the forest nearby, boiled it and drank the poisonous tea. Her husband, who meanwhile had gone to Luang Namtha and was returning with a present for her, did not notice her state of exhaustion until it was too late and she was already dying. He gave her a lavish funeral ceremony and remains overwhelmed with grief.

Suicide by self-poisoning in this village has taken a great toll of the generation of married young females between 20 and 30: 5 out of 15. Fortunately, 3 of them could survive. This astonishing proportion of 1/3 gives a measure of the strain put on young married women, prompt to feel desperately humiliated or jealous, being as they are the lowest ranking member of the family in the house of their in-laws. No wonder they do prefer to bring their husband in their parents’ home, if only their mother is not yet a mother-in-law. Young married women are not the only victims of suicide. In the very beginning of 2002, close to the end of the Moun Year, Ta It’s young nephew, Pang, took his life in the same way after quarrelling with his uncle about the work in the shop. For comparison, in Pang An, a community of about the same size as Pa Kha, I have found two cases of self-poisoning from young unmarried girls in 2001 and one of a young married woman in 2000.

Finally, Kim Di Mun have inherited Chinese clan names, probably granted to them by the Chinese Courts, but they cannot maintain any kind of clan exogamy as the Hmong, for instance, do. They reckon kinship ties on the basis of a descent group of three generations only; a generation further, they welcome marriage between young people of the same clan name. Reversibly, there is no particular feeling of brotherhood between people of the same clan name if they are not close kin. They also lose track easily of their distant forebears even when they keep carefully the list of their names in the genealogy they use in rituals. In Pa Kha there are six clan names: Li (20 families), Tang (5 families), Phan (4 families), Wong (2 families), Chiang (2 families), Lo (1 family). They all keep their own family registers for the living and for the dead, which are much more accurate than the samano khop khua they have been granted since 1995 by the administration. It seems that they must have been quite apathetic to Lao registration, considering the number of gross errors I have found in their registration book. It is quite amazing when one knows the precision they display when carefully noting the hour, day, month and year of birth of each member of the family for future divination of his (her) fate in all circumstances of life. For instance, for a marriage, they consult the Chinese “Book of Mating Spouses” which predicts the fate of the couple and their close kin in the house as a consequence of their marriage, in relation to the inter-reaction of the two elements representing their respective birth times. Clan names also determine the

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4 Nguan, in Lao, Gelsemium elegans, Benth, according to Jules Vidal.
5 Out of the Five Elements, that is the “five types of energy, which inform every substance and every process of change and transformation...The mutual interaction of the elements and the results of this interaction is how the
religious names they can use in performing rituals after they have been ordained as Priests of the Tao (tao kong) and Masters (sai kong) in the Meishan tradition.

Kinship does play a part in choosing to settle in a given village. However the underlying relations at work need to be carefully delineated. In Pa Kha, according to my survey, close agnates can settle in neighboring or in distant houses, not to say distant settlements as well. The two Chiang, Ta Do (N° 3) and Ta Pyo (N°4), who are older and younger brothers, live close to each other. But the Phan, Ta Wang (N° 19) and Ta Zaem (N° 24), who also are brothers, live at distance from each other. However Ta Nga (N° 23), who has fled his father Ta Wang’s house, has come to settle close to his uncle. Among the Li, Ta Pun (N° 11) is rather close to his first younger brother, Ta Pat (N° 9), but rather far from his other younger brother, Ta Chat (N° 21). Ta Chai (N° 10) is close to his younger brother Ta Ning (N° 15); the same happens with Ta Nyan (N°30) and Ta Tao (N° 26). Except for these few agnates, most of the time the guy next door is merely a neighbor or, sometimes, a brother-in-law. In fact, in-laws may be more instrumental in choosing one’s neighborhood. For instance, the village headman, Ta Tut (N° 14), has four sisters, three in Pa Kha, one in Ta Fak and one younger brother in Pang An. In Pa Kha, his three sisters’ houses (N° 12, 15, 16) are immediate neighbors. Moreover, his wife’s younger brother, Ta Kaet (N° 25), who lives downhill, helps him as his deputy in village matters concerning the outside world, and his elder son, Ta Nuey (N° 18), who recently chose to get out of the extended family with his wife and their 3-year old daughter, has built his house at short distance downhill. Ta It (N° 7) lives not too far from his younger sister, Sa Gyu, married with Ta Chai, the elder son of Ta Blay (N° 1). The latter married with with Ta Do (N° 3), and his younger sister married next door to Ta Tow (N° 5) while his daughter, Sa Pit, has married a Phan from Phongsaly, Ta Din (N° 24), who, as a newcomer, has settled downhill. Ta Yot (N° 2), who has no agnate in this village, has three married daughters. The younger one, Sa Ngin, 23, in the house next door, is the wife of Ta Do’s son. Sa Dom, 27, has married Ta Nga (N° 23), another -- not related -- Phan, and Sa Sam, 31, a Li, Ta Blay (N° 22) as a second husband. The last two daughters are living downhill far from their father and brother but next door to each other. Ta Bao (N° 6), a lonely Tang on the right side of the Huay Kaeo, has two elder sisters nearby, one married next door to Ta It (N° 7), the other to Ta Pyo (N° 4), while a third one is the wife of Ta Tao (N° 26) at the entrance of the village, downhill.

From this brief survey, the picture we could first draw from the distribution of clan names has completely changed and we can appreciate the importance of marriage as the main link between independent households. Proximity of in-laws is to be linked to a rather long bride service, ending up with the son-in-law settling close to his wife’s parents if his own do not already belong to the neighborhood. A kinship network through females tie the village households together more efficiently than the rare close agnate relations through males.

It is interesting to compare Mien and Mun, the only two Yao societies\(^6\) represented in Laos. They both have solved the problem of the Chinese pattern of clan exogamy: ignoring it above three generations of common immediate forebears. For the Mien however, there has been an intermediate stage with the splitting of clans in a number of sub-clans, within which later marriage was also allowed. This stage, linked to a historical event in the Mien tradition,\(^7\)

\(<\) Feuchtwang 1974 : 40\(>\)

\(^6\) In China, there are no less than 7 different Yao groups of which only two, the Mien and the Mun, have come to the Indochina Peninsula: see Jacques Lemoine & Chiao Chien, ed., <i>The Yao of South China, Recent International Studies</i>, Paris 1991, Pangu, p. 23, 46.

\(^7\) “The Crossing of the Sea”, see Jacques Lemoine, <i>Yao Ceremonial Paintings</i>, Bangkok 1982, White Lotus p. 15-18
which is not shared by the Mun, proves to be unnecessary to them. Clan names in both societies are similar and the six Mun clans of Pa Kha, Li, Tang, Phan, Lo, Chiang and Wong are also found among the Mien. Phan (pronounced fan) from the Chinese P’an is pronounced pien by the Mien. Wong from the Chinese Huang, is pronounced yang by the Mien. Lo (from the Chinese Lu, Lou in Cantonese) is pronounced Lao by the Mien. Both societies have kept the generation names series, which enable any male with an adult name to know if he belongs to the same descent group as any other one bearing the same clan name. This not only means a common Chinese cultural background but also the will to preserve an ideal patrilineal and patrilocal pattern even when circumstances have conducted to renounce a key part of the system: clan exogamy.

Another common feature with the Mien Yao is the high frequency of adoption among Kim Di Mun. Whenever there are orphans without parents among the various other groups around, they hurry to buy those children from their custodians. The reasons for adoption are often that the adopters have some difficulty in having their own children. It (N° 7) is a typical example: his wife, Sa Kien, 40 now, says that she lost 5 newborn children. In fact two of them were Akha babies that they bought, the first one for 8 Indochina piastres, because her mother had died when delivering her. She was one-month old when they adopted her but died when she was 9-month old. The second one, adopted at the same age but from a living mother of Muang Long, cost them 20 piastres. She also died when she reached her ninth month. They then adopted Sa Hay, a 8-year-old Akha girl from Ban Pa Hom that they bought for 25 piastres, and who is now 18 and already married with Ta Ning (N°27). Then, Sa Kien had a son, Ta Pang, now 17, and two other girls that she says she delivered at Muang Long hospital. Among the adopted ones, I have found Akha, Kui Long, Kui Sung, and Lue children. The age of adoption can be as late as 14 like for Sa Dyan in N° 1, who lost her Kui Long mother in Pang An where she was working as farm girl for the Mun. Ta Chai paid 40.000 kips to the Pang An Mun in order to meet the expenses of her burying. Sa Dyan’s adoptive parents say that they had no problem in teaching her their language and making her a perfect young Mun woman. Now 20, she married at 18 Ta Ngin, the third son of the headman of Ta Fak: Ta Mao.

Whatever their personal story, these children are brought up like other Mun children, suffering no racial prejudice, even when everybody, including themselves, knows about their origin.

4. Social Fabric and Economy

![Fig. 1: As can be seen on this picture, women's watering cans look pathetic in front of the dry soil they have to cultivate. Nam Ma river flows just down the tree hedge at the end of the field, which could be easily watered with a motor pump.]

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The choice of residence in one village is further determined by the living conditions. Pa Kha is a large territory of 399.3 ha, 126.5 of them being devoted to reserve forest, 98 to usable forest in the mountain above their village, 17.5 ha of bushes around their village and rice fields, 152.5 ha of ‘irrigated’ rice field land, and 4.8 ha for plantation and construction. The villagers cultivate swiddens in the mountain, irrigated rice fields between the road and the Nam Ma, and recently under the impulse of the Non-Formal Education Bureau and the UNESCO project which has provided seeds, they have started a vegetable gardens area along the Nam Ma. There still is a part of this land which they leave to *Eupatorium odoriferum* bushes, unable to irrigate it, because they should dig deep ditches to skirt round a couple of heights. These ditches would be too deep to be handmade and they contemplate the idea that some agency will provide them the 2000 US$ necessary to hire the mechanical digger of a private company in Muang Long. Similarly, the vegetable gardens by the Nam Ma, need to be watered everyday, but the Nam Ma flows three to four meters below in the dry season and a motor pump would spare a lot of women’s energy, multiplying the yield of their land.

The Nam Ma is a problem for the villagers of both Ta Fak and Pa Kha. It has a powerful stream even in the dry season, is deep when narrow, and capable of sudden rises of its level in the rainy season to the point of overflowing a village like Ta Fak in the 90’s.

I have done a brief survey of rice crops and consumption in the village. It shows that there exist unequal working and living conditions according to the kind of family, the number of working adults, the kind of fields owned and cultivated.

In a random sample of 5 extended families and 13 nuclear families, a little more than half the village houses, only 2 extended families and 6 nuclear families have not produced enough
rice in 2001 for meeting their annual consumption. Obviously, the needy are more likely to be found among nuclear families. Rice consumption is between 500 and 750g a day per individual with an average around 600. They husk their paddy themselves at the village mill installed in 1995. As I could measure it myself, there is a 40% loss once it is husked. The best part of the bran is used in the pigs’ soup. The needy think they can borrow from their kin, sell pigs or chicken to buy rice, or go to work for others, in the village, or outside the village, for NCA for example. Mutual help is a rule for the in-laws, whether at work, in building a house because it must be assembled in one day, or borrowing rice, money, etc. If it is a big debt, it should be returned; if not, refunding is not necessary and may be a standing debt until the opportunity comes to help in return. If a big debtor cannot return what he has borrowed, nobody lends him any more. If the lender is not a kin, then money must be returned by all means lest the family of the borrower, if he dies, will be held responsible for it. One can see here that the village functions also as a kind of bank for the poor and the needy as well as an employment agency. Reversibly, the well-off finds in the village opportunities to increase his economical and political power in return for his concern for his fellow villagers’ welfare.

Recently, surveyors have measured the cultivated surfaces, and land deeds have been handed to the owners. Since then, everybody in the village have a clear sense of land measurement expressed in terms of square meters and hectares. This land property normally cannot be sold nor exchanged, according to Pa Kha’s headman, but I have attended a negotiation of the sort between Ta Ngaeng of Pa Kha and Ta Wang of Ta Fak. They had already agreed that Ta Wang would buy Ta Ngaeng’s rice field on Ta Fak territory. In order to have the money, he has already sold one of his own rice fields to another villager. The last part of the transaction is the bill of sale, which must be written on an administrative form and countersigned and stamped by the village headman. These slash-and-burn cultivators have definitely entered peasant economy linked to land ownership, an exquisite delight for these former swiddeners.
Their cultivation technique is still very close to swidden cultivation. They cultivate their irrigated rice fields by simply sowing seeds without bedding out. Many of them keep growing swidden rice in a bid to balance the hazards of the new irrigated rice fields. Swiddens also provide vegetables and probably (but nobody wants to talk about this, except to say it does not exist anymore) opium poppies.

In fact, Pa Kha still has a reserve of arable land to clear and convert into irrigated rice fields once the problem of the regular water distribution from the two brooks on both side of their land has been solved. The well-off all have well watered rice fields. The less well-off and the later comers have to take the remaining land and sometimes the painful opening of a new rice field leads nowhere: the crop is meager or non-existent because of water shortage. If, such as last year, a bumper crop is half destroyed by a week of unceasing rain when paddy had just
been cut and was still lying on the ground in the field, the loss is far worse in the case of smallholders. Sometimes, an individual is the only victim when, for instance, a water buffalo has managed to enter his field and eat rice sprouts.

Water buffaloes grazing freely in the bushes around the village and the rice fields are the only draught animals they can use for tilling with the traditional swing plough. The UNESCO Project has provided them with a Chinese motor-powered tiller that they never used. They say it’s dangerous, for a villager of Nam Di, close to Namtha, has broken his leg when this half mechanical machine, which needs to be ridden like a bike and is rather high, has fallen on him. They also say that it may well work in old rice fields where the soil is loose, but in their case where the soil is still very hard, it has little grip. Anyway, they have assembled the front blades inside out but they don’t care and let it —idle and dusty—slowly get rusty under Ta Wang’s house on stilts (N° 16). Recently, Ta Ang, the Ta Tow’s son (N° 5), bought against two buffaloes a brand new 8 HP Chinese Wumai “Tanxia 61 series” power-driven cultivator in Xieng Lap, using his mother’s connection there (she was adopted in 1960 by a Lanten family when she was only one-month old from a Lue family fleeing war). This two-wheeled cultivator can be walked in the field and is equipped with all the cultivating tools needed for rice farming. It is an ideal tool for Ta Tut, the headman, who thinks that a similar 10 HP model would fit all their clearing needs. They could start, I suggested, with this machine already in their village, but Ta Tut remarked that the owner wants one million kips rental fee to clear 100 ha, too high a price by the village standards!

5. Development and modernization

This last issue raises the problem of development and modernization in this village. The villagers do not question their coming in, but they want to keep innovations under control and altogether reinforce their ethnic cultural frontier.

A striking sight when walking around in the village is the number of “modern” houses of which there exist two types: houses on stilts in the shape of Lue houses, and houses on the ground with cemented floors and corrugated iron roofs. For all its innovative building material, the second type preserves at least the shape of a traditional Kim Di Mun’s house, that is with a dirt floor, plaited bamboo or plank walls and a imperata thatched roof. These old style houses, cool in sunny daytime and warm at night and in winter as Ta Ngaeng liked to say, are loosing ground one after the other. The imperata roofing has to be changed once every five years lest rain pours in through the holes during the rainy season. Facing all his domestic problems, even after remarking that cement floor is too cold compared with dirt floor, Ta Ngaeng was thinking that he should have repaired his house in the new style with cemented floor and corrugated iron roofing. And now his eldest son was going out and building a house on stilts, with corrugated iron roofing!

The actual number of houses on stilts is growing steadily. They are already 11, plus the foundations of a twelfth one, against two houses with cemented floors and tin roofs. The great majority of the houses on stilts are built uphill (N° 2, 3, 4, 7, 11, 14, 16) and a few at mid village downhill (N° 17, 18, 19 and the foundations of the new one). The cemented floor houses, of Ta It (N° 7) and Ta Kaet (N° 25), lay somehow at the two extremities of the stilt-
houses area, Ta It’s uphill, Ta Kaet’s downhill. Change in housing has introduced a number of innovations for their inhabitants: wooden floors, sometimes covered with mats with the obligation for all to leave shoes down the stair case, windows with more light in day time, corner rooms in the Lue way, an open space with bedding for accommodating guests in the main room and a separate kitchen house are the most important adopted features. It has also provided a new space under the house to keep the weaving loom, the spinning wheel and the winder, the bicycle when there is one, and all sorts of cultivation tools, plough, hoes, spades, etc., not to mention the frame for making paper when it is not used. In a couple of houses also, there is a tractor-trailer used both for transporting heavy loads and people from the village to distant fields as far as may go their narrow paths or to another village such as Pang An by the road, but, if necessary, they go as far as Namtha and Bokeo.

Fig. 5: The village headman, Ta Tut’s house, Nr 14 on the map, seen from the back. His tractor-trailer is parked under his house. In the foreground behind the bars of the gate, his 14-year-old son, Ta Paen, together with his (naked) 4-year-old grand-daughter, Sa Lan. Notice His neighbor Ta Naeng’s traditional house, on the right side of this picture.

Fig. 5: The other tractor-trailer under Ta Tow’s house N° 5. Notice: corrugated iron roofs are less steep than the traditional *imperata* roofing as shown in Fig. 7 below.
The tractor-trailer is the pick-up car of the wealthy for the time being and they prefer Chinese second-hand ones with a front window and a roof.

The cemented floor houses are more classical. Cooking is prepared on a stove under the same roof but, sometimes, in a separate kitchen also with windows. The main concern is with spilling water. In a dirt house, it would be absorbed in the soil. On a cement floor, it spills around and the floor becomes dirty and muddy. Some inhabitants and visitors take off their shoes at the entrance. But the floor is cold. Of course, in the case of a separate kitchen, water is used in the kitchen and is not spilt in the main house. On the only two examples actually existing in Pa Kha, one has bedrooms, the other only beds in the main house. Because Ta Kaet is accommodating his son-in-law doing his groom service, his house has a kind of bedroom quarter separated by a partition and a door from the living room.
Ta It’s interest for modernity has also led him to operate the first tiny shop in the village, selling mostly cigarettes, soap, instant soups, monoglutamate, cookies and candies.

Unfortunately, Ta It’s involvement in this shop has started the domestic rift with Pang, his adopted nephew and shop attendant, ending up in the suicide of the latter, in January 2002.

Last but not least, and maybe the greatest revolution of the 80’s in Southeast Asia, electricity is now available for everyone close to a stream with the general use of small water-powered generators. The villagers are quite clever bringing electricity from the Huay Kaeo to their house, hanging wires on bamboo poles and using plastic water tubes to prevent them from being in contact with dry grass when they drive them in through their thatched roofs.
But electricity is not only used for lightening up in one’s house at night time. It can also be

Fig. 11: A modern granary with a wooden frame, bamboo walls but a corrugated iron roof. Extra iron plates are used around the stilts to prevent rats from climbing up. In the foreground, a water fountain.

powering a radio set and, why not, a TV set. Everybody in the village has seen a TV set and, may wish to own such a luxury, which can be watched in some Muang Long tiny restaurants. On the other hand, equipment is expensive and result not guaranteed. And there is more interesting than TV talk-shows in Thai or Lao and boring adverts of never seen, never heard strange products. This is in all likelihood what came to Ta Paw’s mind (N° 17) when he decided he wanted a VCD player. He went to Muang Mang, 25 km from the border on the way from Muang Sing to Meng La and Tseng Hung, and bought there a VCD player, a TV set and a powerful generator to operate both of them together and, probably advised by the Chinese merchant, he also bought a power equalizer. He spent for

Fig. 12: A traditional granary with a wooden frame and bamboo walls and roofing. Close to it, firewood brought from the swidden and the forest is stocked in a rack.
all 1745 Chinese RMP and could have bought a Chinese antenna for another 700 RMP, which he did not. It also cost him 5000 kips for a return trip by bus and he spent two days traveling. Naturally, he got used to all this equipment in no time. Now, he rents or exchanges CD in Muang Long and was just watching a Thai version of “Gladiator” when I first came to his house. Later on, I could use his electricity to operate my laptop computer and recharge various batteries of my personal equipment. Ta Paw, 50, and his wife, 43, are now living alone in their house. He has a surplus rice production. About 7 years ago, he has built this rather big house on stilts for which, doing most of the work himself, he only spent one million kips for the corrugated iron roof.

Fig. 13: In the foreground, a water-powered generator of electricity by the Huay Kaeo. 

In the background, a fishpond.

Fig. 14: A view of the houses and granaries on the other side of the Huay Kaeo, at the ford.
He is also a heavy opium smoker and it doesn’t seem that CD watching will divert him from his habit. In order not to be invaded by children when he watches CD, he usually locks his door, an unusual behavior in the village. He also has an audience among villagers and asks them for a small participation fee. In fact he has somehow introduced in the village a Video room. In his collection of CD I have found a couple of Chinese porn films. He and his wife and onlookers’ constant watching has certainly broaden their worldview (his commentary on Gladiator was that these Western people fought very hard) but pornography and lust is a new parameter in such a village. Knowing their past effects on migrant Mien Yao in Western countries, one may worry about its long term effect on the youth and, maybe, the elders. As nice as people may be, loose moral is certainly a way for HIV-AIDS penetration in any given social space.

With all these new modern commodities, a casual visitor would expect drastic change in the way of living: nutrition or clothing for instance. On the contrary, cooking habits have not changed except when a Lao official visits the place and they prepare for him a lap pa “minced fish flesh”, a Lao delicacy. They can fish instantly from their fishponds along the Huay Kaeo, but seldom do it for themselves. Their ordinary diet is made of rice and boiled or fried vegetables with, sometimes, a bit of the bacon or fat drying on a rack above the kitchen fire. Pork meat is served only after a sacrifice and at the home of the priests, usually granted a share of the sacrificed animals after any ritual. These villagers have not discover yet globalized cattle or poultry farms. Who would complain? However they call for the vet as soon as their pigs start looking ill and don’t mind to see them given antibiotic shots.

Clothing is, maybe, the most conservative part of their actual life. Except for a couple of young men sporting Western style shirts or trousers, men all wear what they think is their traditional ethnic costume: a black tunic buttoned on the left, and a pair of light indigo blue trousers in the same homemade cotton material. As Ta Ngaeng would say, “it is cool in the sun, warm at sunset”, and when trying to spot distant tribal relatives, the first question is: do they wear a trouser and jacket like ours? Women are all, without the slightest exception, wearing the traditional black indigo cotton long gown buttoned in the upper part on the right, and open in the front, and slit in the back and on each side starting from the waist. It is cut in a way quite similar to the ao dai of the Vietnamese women. Like them they also have a pair of (here black indigo) trousers under it. But similarities stop short here. Trousers are no longer than below the knee, supplemented by white leggings, and the gown tails are lifted up to show the leggings and ease walking. (It reminds somehow of ancient Chinese traveling scholars.) The gown is hemmed in cyclamen red and white cotton thread and the same takes the place of a missing collar from which a red silk or cotton streamer is hanging down to the waist. When the gown has been
washed many times the streamer turns from bright cyclamen red to pink and white. They say they choose a fading color on purpose and are expecting this result. They also wear as a belt a red tie ending up with beads and red streamers. Plucking their eyebrows as soon as they become pubescent, their face has a moonlike look accentuated by a very special and elegant headdress, their hair being drawn up to form a bun maintained by a big silver pin, except for a pair of braids they sometimes bring back on their naked forehead. As a protection from the sun they also wear a black kerchief hemmed in red. In this attire, they go to fields and to Muang Long as well, carrying things they need or buy in their large white shoulder bag.

They enjoy washing at the fountains and use for washing themselves a Lao sarong that probably their grandmothers did not know. Their sight in wet sarong leads the young teacher’s wife to contemplate the idea of their dropping all their traditional clothes and adopting much more comfortable Lao blouse and sarong, on their way to modernity, a revolution that does not seem likely to happen at the present stage. More than tradition, their clothing is a strong ethnic marker behind which they can protect their identity and freedom of thinking.
. 6. Social Fabric, Modernization and Health

However, there is a field where modernization has a good grip: health. Muang Long hospital was opened some ten years ago. It is a 3,5 km walk, bicycle ride or transportation on tractor-trailer. And the villagers are now used to go there when they have health problems. It is difficult to find out today what was the traditional course of illness and healing. They know better about Western medicine than herbal therapy. However, in the same way as all of them know about poisonous satyeo yai, they still use some herb tea, a mixture of mun tsay teng bin and gin bu, for healing diarrhea. The mix is called nyau mun.

These plants (that I could not identify) have a bitter taste, ma aem, with a refreshing effect, xiing, on a burning intestine, nyau kyom. Unfortunately, there was no available specialist to explain if they share the Chinese theories about hot and cold meals. Coughing, lung infections and the like are rather taken to the hospital and treated, I was told, with ampicillin shots. For simple headaches, pyae mun, they take a Lao kind of aspirin or Tylenol, Ya Phot Hai, «Pain Killer» that they can buy in the two tiny drugstores of Muang Long.

If herb doctors may have disappeared, there is still plenty of room for the shamans and seers dealing with unexplainable illnesses, mythic pathology and the left over of Western medicine. Those shamans, kwa mun, are the equivalent of the bow kwa mien1 among the Mien Yao. There are four or five of them performing in the village (Ta Pun, Ta Chiang, Ta Wang etc.). They have spirit helpers who must be fed by a chicken or a pig sacrifice according to the seriousness of illnesses. An original feature is that the Seven Immortals of the Chinese lore are said to be listed among these spirit helpers. Having attended none of their performance, I shall refrain to describe them from hearsay. Ta Put, the headman, is a famous seer through the method of the stick. After calling his spirit helpers, he stretches his both arms measuring a bamboo or wooden stick the size of which corresponds exactly to their length. If, in the process, his stretched arms fall short of reaching the stick’s edge, this is an encoded message from the spirits, left to his interpretations, based, of course, on the question he was inquiring. The Mien Yao use the same technique.

Apart from infant mortality and women dying in childbirth, there are a number of unexplained deaths occurring in the village. In house No 5, for instance, a 20-year-old young man, Kham Mi (from the name they gave him when he was doing his two-year national service) recently died of a throat infection (mumps? phlegm infection? tonsil infection? diphtheria?) after 4, 5 days of heavy fever and vomiting. He used to go to Muong Sing and was in Nam Tha 18 days before his death. They took him to Muang Long hospital to no avail. The doctor and nurses told them that the neng (?) were getting in and nothing could be done to it. A systematic study of death occurrences would probably be very enlightening.

Last but not least, the problem of opium addicts is a real concern for the village health and economy. But the opium merchandizing part of Pa Kha economy is covered by secrecy and if it is obvious that opium can be found easily in the village, the on-going regulations of Lao PDR do not prompt the villagers to explain its whereabouts. Given as it is, there are in the village between 10 and 15 opium smokers, out of which number I have spotted only three heavy smokers. Their fate is not the same: Ta Paw, 52, the VCD watcher, is one of them and seems to meet quite well his spending on it. He has little family responsibility

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and enjoys his freedom and pleasure within a rather prosperous household economy. Ta Wang (N° 19), 51, is the reverse story. He and his wife, 43, are heavy smokers and do not produce their opium for which they spend all their available resources. They say that they hire themselves in order to get the rice they don’t produce (they have cropped only 450 kg of paddy this year to be shared by the four remaining members of their family) and are sometimes paid in opium. Their irrational quest for opium has led Ta Wang’s son (Ta Ning N° 28) to get away from his father’s house and it may be the reason why their son-in-law from Pang An has deserted their daughter Sa Gay and grand-daughter, Sa Fang, 7. This family gives the impression of running into trouble. Another heavy opium smoker, Ta Zaen (N° 28), 60, has found a provisional solution: he goes working with the Hmong in B. Mon Laem and gets one saloeng opium a day for husking paddy. He was just back from a two-month labor trip. Ta Gyau’s story (N° 29), 32, the youngest addict in the village, has a more optimistic overtone. He has been smoking opium since he was a child and hid this from his future in-laws when, some ten years ago, he came from distant Ban Fin Ho, on Luang Nam Tha’s road, to marry Sa Cha, Ta Ton’s daughter, in the village uphill. After one year groom service, he was on his own, carrying his problem with him to a poor thatch hut downhill. When NCA started visiting the village, he volunteered for detoxification. He eventually succeeded but, after two years, relapsed. His problem is asthma and opium has proven its efficacy in his case (is it provoked by the craving for opium?). Now he is trying to cut off for the second time and has already spent three months without smoking. NCA gives him ton sida leaves to boil and drink as tea. Until now, in charge of feeding his wife and two children, he has done no rice field, but only one swidden, yielding a meager 300 kg paddy and must hire himself around most of the year in order to meet his family needs.

Other opium smokers are all belonging to the old generation and seem to know what they do and, so far, their habit doesn’t seem to disrupt their family’s economy and life. They probably will not transmit it to their children, if opium cultivation is definitely eradicated from Laos in 2005 as announced by governmental agencies.

Inquiring with Ta Tut on STDs in the village, I was told the incredible story of Ta Kaeng, a 28-year-old young man from Ta Fak, brother-in-law of Ta Chai uphill in Pa Kha and now another heavy opium smoker. He said he had a long lasting blennorrhoea with pus coming out his penis with pain when urinating. He said he discovered this phenomenon 4 years ago, one night he was sleeping in his opium field. He did not go to the hospital to have it checked because he could not afford the cost of treatment (?), and continued to have sexual intercourse with his wife who moreover delivered one healthy child in 1999 (still alive today). She is herself adamant that she is not suffering from anything at all. Thinking it would be quite rewarding to have this medical detective story solved by taking one or both of them to Nam Tha hospital and have their blood and sperm, etc. carefully checked in the lab, I decided Ta Kaeng to go with me to Luang Namtha in early February 02 after he had celebrated New Year. The lab findings have shown that it was not a mythic illness of this couple, as some Ta Fak villager pointed out, but neither a STD: only a long lasting sore. I hope it has also been a good demonstration of what to do in case of STDs, in the HIV-AIDS context.

7. Social Fabric and Religion

The last aspect of Lanten Yao’s life worth to investigate is certainly the part they devote to religious rituals. All of them, including the Kim Di Mun, share the same religious tradition, Meishan doctrine, a blending of Meishan masters’ exorcistic and healing rituals

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2 Psidium guayana, L. Guava tree.
for the living, and Taoist priests’ rituals for the dead. This doctrine, originating from an ancient

Yao independent region in Hunan, has, since its opening under the pressure of Song administration, spread not only to all the Yao but also to a number of Hunan, Guangxi, Guangdong and Yunnan other ethnic groups. It differs noticeably from the Mien tradition, which is also acquainted to Meishan but differently blended with another doctrine and theogony: those of the Lushan lore.
Pa Kha is more than anything else a religious community. Similarly to the Mien Yao (and it may well be Meishan’s influence on them), every male member of the community should be initiated to rituals through ordination ceremonies. As a rule, the Kim Di Mun seem to prefer an early ordination at age 16 or 17, after which they require training for all the newly ordained, who play parts in active rituals under the direction of the high priests and masters. A stage direction book, describing in order the different sequences of a given ritual, helps them for this. Another special feature of the Lanten Yao religious tradition as a whole is, together with the division of ritualists into (Meishan) Masters, *sai kong* and Priests of Tao, *tao kong*, the general availability to be ordained in both orders and perform under different divine patronages healing rituals as well as funeral and memorial ceremonies for the dead.

A very interesting point, showing that this is a later development, is the fact that there still exist series of different generation names for the priests and masters according to one’s
clan name. Nowadays, being ordained in both capacities, the ritualist uses both series, each one in the corresponding specialty.

In Pa Kha, there are three master ritualists: Ta Ngaeng, the former headman, Ta Tut, the present headman and Ta Do. They are required in major rituals for the dead or ordination of the young generation in Ta Fak and Pang An as well. They are well equipped in ritual books and used to direct their apprentices in the most intricate rituals. On their liturgical knowledge rests the religious culture of the group but their patient sharing of

Fig. 21: Preparing paper sheets for a ritual under the close watch of a little daughter and grand-daughter. Notice the top bun maintained by a long silver hair pin, and, on the right of the picture, a baby hammock.

Fig. 22: A great deal of the bamboo paper goes to the decoration of the ceremonial altars. Here, part of an altar for a memorial ceremony for their dead forebears, Ta Chai, they usually hold during the 10th and 11th months of the Chinese Year. This picture shows the lower part of a huge paper curtain where the names of invited divinities are all written on colored paper leaflets. The three colors, yellow, blue and red indicate the participation of a tao kong (yellow), a ta meng (blue) and a sai kong (red).
rituals in order to teach all their acolytes, first dancing, second beating the drum or the cymbals, third reading, chanting and accompanying themselves with these two instruments altogether, then writing memorials to the god, making paper puppets, paper accessories, masks and so on, will in the long term educate some of the younger generation to take over the direction of the stage. Even secret formulae to be only whispered in public are to be transmitted in due time according to the level of knowledge of their acolytes.

It is interesting to see that in a major ritual as a *Ta Chai* (literally ‘Major Fast’ although the original meaning of the Buddhist concept has been lost and replaced by a major sacrifice to the ancestors) which lasts three full days and nights, all their kin and virtually all their fellow villagers are invited to participate, at least, in the great collective meals. The communal spirits is then at its zenith.

Part of their religious activities are linked to the Chinese calendar and reproduce the main yearly rituals of the Chinese, such as Qing Ming on the 3rd day of the 3rd month, Mulian festival of the dead on the 7th day of the 7th month, Zhong Yang on the 9th day of the 9th month and New Year on the 30th day of the 12th month. Among major rituals which are not yearly reproduced, ordinations can be organized on any auspicious day of the 11th and 12th months, and *Ta Chai* on any auspicious day of the 10th or 11th month.

Various kinds of spirits fill the unseen world. The souls of the dead are one. Once departed, they are engulfed in the vast spirit crowds, fighting their way to the destination...
their relatives living in this world are showing them, first in the course of funeral, and then at various memorials whenever these living relatives find that they need additional help. How do they know? Because at the same time, part of the soul of the deceased is going to its destination in the unseen, namely the Sanctuary of Yangzhou, Yangzhou Miao, (the Mien have the Cavern of Yangzhou, Yangzhou Dong, see Lemoine 1982: 114), while another part is taken back home where it is enshrined among the pyau man, “house spirits”. This generic term encompasses not only the deceased forebears of the family, chia sin in Sino-Mun or pyau bu in colloquial Mun (wrongly quoted as Phi Bou in Laurent Chazée 1999: 120), but

Fig. 25: Two sai kong apprentices in red robes are “animating the drums” in an introductive dance of and for the gods.

Drums, which give the beat, are the main musical instruments in Lanten rituals.

Fig. 26: The lion of the Thunder God, a particularity of the Lanten. When it is flapped vigorously, the lion’s roaring makes the evil spirits stampede and the wall of Hades collapse.

Fig. 27: The masters have already been replaced by their disciples. Here, Ta It, clad in the tao kong beautifully embroidered robe representing the Heavens of the Taoist stellar gods and the King of the Tenth tribunal of Hades in the middle of his back, his Court audience tablet pinched behind his neck into his robe, has already started reading and chanting rituals to the Heavenly Worthies who care for the dead.
also a whole community of protecting divinities: those of the “odorous fire” *hyang hu*, including Ling Kong, Feng Sanjiai and Guan Yin, staying around the incense burner, the “Masters of the Saints” *xeng thuy*, including Emperor P’an, the Jade Emperor and the Thunder Emperor, and finally *Dan Nong*, Shen Nong, the Chinese god of agriculture. The Meishan tradition, already present in the special worship of thunder, is more specifically represented by *tai mu*, the Imperial Mother, who cares for the flowers representing the souls of future children and who is a kind of fertility goddess, and *san yuan*, the Three Primordials of early Taoism.

3 Laurent Chazée (1999: 121), who seems to have attended a similar *chai* ritual, first mentions *tai mu* in an approximate translation in Lao as *Phi Dok* (“flowers’ spirit”), which he further translates in English as “father spirit”, and then in a kind of phonetic transcription: *Tahii* spirit, for ‘*tai*’ of ‘*tai mu*’, unaware it is the same!
The standing protectors of the family and the Meishan salvation forces are invited to attend all important rituals, but they are not paramount worthies of the pantheon, such as the Three Pure Ones – of Jade Azure, Upper Azure and Supreme Azure -- of the tao kong Cheng Yi Taoist tradition who control operations to rescue lost souls from the gaols of hell, di nyok. Finally, the whole territory, land and forest, keng, of a village is under the protection and control of its local lord, pun keng. Illness is a way ancestors’ souls can make their living relatives aware of their problems in the other world. When there is a suspicion of unnatural suffering, a shaman is called in to check immediately what is wrong with the patient or/and his family. The detection of problems falling onto his ancestors in the Beyond will motivate the family head on undertaking a major chai.

From this very brief outline of a wide-ranging subject, a lay reader can surmise the dense religious life -- starting in early childhood -- the Lanten Yao are living and how much dependent they are on the village community resources to meet its economical and cultural requirements. The cultural aspect is certainly paramount for all the intellectual efforts it demands from these tribal swiddeners in transition toward a simple peasant society (not much different from the ancient Han and non-Han communities of Sichuan where Taoism was first born⁴). Their cultural level and that of the Lao Buddhist peasant communities, both of them being highly sophisticated, cannot be compared with any Christian or Islamic community’s.

A good demonstration of my point are these chai, the “memorial fasts” carried out to save their ancestors. They perform them in the ninth month, at the end of the agricultural yearly cycle and before celebrating the living in the ordination ceremonies and passing New Year. Basically, a major chai is organized to gather all the past and recent ancestors whose names are kept on the ancestors list in the organizing household. In order to remove the obstacles they may face in rallying their living family, three masters, each for one set of the divine chessboard, are invited to deal with the protecting gods, the Meishan salvation army and the supreme heavenly agencies which monitor the fate of the dead in the unseen other world. When all this divine parade has come on stage through dancing and singing and is finally sitting in the gallery for prominent guests, the search for ancestors starts, ending up in Fengtu, the walled city of the dead where they are judged for their past deeds during their life and suffer accordingly a punishment matching their offences. A paper streamer inviting them is hanged on a bamboo pole outside the house, at the foot of which

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⁴ See the very interesting historical account of Yao Taoism given by Zhang Youjun in “A simple Explanation of Taoism among the Yao” in J. Lemoine and Chiao Chien ed. 1991: The Yao of South China, Paris, Pangu, p. 311-346.

A small-scale model of the Fengtu high walls is represented by way of a circular piece of white cloth maintained standing upright by bamboo sticks. The first day after the first dance for “animating the drums” tong diu, they announce to the ancestors that the Three Pure Ones are going to fetch them from the Temple of Yangzhou (where their mystical graves are) and lock them up in hell before washing their sins. Accordingly, the priest slips the ancestors list under half a gourd inside the small-scale high wall. The next day, after a roll call in order to prevent wandering spirits to join the group of identified ancestors, the priest breaks open the wall of the city, crushing the gourd under his foot and taking back the precious list of ancestors’ names to the family head who thus can bring them back inside the house while the priest, blowing magic water, wipes out all signs of hell. All day long, the souls of the dead are fed and entertained by various performers. They are also presented with paper cloths, money, pack animals, etc. in heaps to be burned at their departure. Altogether, their graves, ban mu, in Yangzhou are cleaned and repaired. On the second day in the evening, two acolytes of the sai kong perform a humorous play. After building a terrestrial bridge, they are suddenly visited by two primeval ancestors of the Yao race, the hiu kong, each wearing a wooden or a paper mask and carrying a very long phallus. They first poke with it the place the Imperial Mother is sitting (for, as a fecundity goddess, she likes young men and also ribaldry), and then they ask money in turn from each of the three masters. All these hilarious scenes rejoice young children and the elderly as well; finally the two masks disappear in the head of the family’s room, supposedly entering the Imperial Mother’s red pavilion. After this comical interlude, the ancestors and their descendants take a rest, nyap tzui. The whole big room floor is covered with people of all ages heavily sleeping… The third day, the family sacrifices a pig and feeds its ancestors with pig liver during a last general feast, wan yin, jointly chaired by the sai kong and the ta meng. Then, the ancestors are sent off to their Yangzhou abode, the Imperial Mother to her ‘octagonal high pavilion in the palace of Ngaoshan (Maoshan?)’ and so on. When, after sunset, all the VIP are gone, the altar and the various accessories made for this ritual are all of a sudden demolished, broken and set on fire outside the house. Nothing remains of this gallery for the gods they made appear for the time of a ritual and now return to the unseen, where it belongs as soon as the gods have left. The three masters will stay another night and morning in the house, the time to deconsecrate properly the last remaining pieces of the session and to set back at their proper place the ancestors and the divine protectors. Once they have left the house, next morning, nothing can be taken out of it any more for the next three days.

In this extraordinary encounter of the living and the dead on the ta chai interface, the religious community has reasserted its total solidarity with the house organizing the ritual. Any member of the community able to meet the expenditure of such a collective ritual may rely on the whole village taking part. “It costs me at least 850,000 kips “ remarked Ta Tut after the ceremony at his home, “and I don’t include rice consumption!” .Ta Blay’s son-in-law, from Ta Fak, observed that they had used 150 large homemade paper sheets that could have been sold 3,000 kips a piece!

Nevertheless, the have and have-not -- who all attended -- have been closely united and all fighting side by side the same Chinese literacy battle amidst the intricate sequences of textbooks to read or sing, of dancing interludes, etc., in a kind of large musical show of their faith and myths. After attending such a holistic performance, it becomes quite obvious to any casual observer that a Lanten Yao, man or woman, can only fulfill his (her) expectations from life in the midst of a Lanten village community. He (she) may change from one village to another according to the particular circumstances of his (her) individual
life story but will always want to stay in a Lanten environment. For the Lanten in this case, as well as for the Mien Yao, religion is the final bulwark of the ethnic frontier and as such, the most treasured part of their cultural heritage.

8. The Gender Issue

I assume that, in their social environment, women are as narrowly dependent on their Lanten culture to survive as men. They are shy and bashful in ordinary time and quite difficult to approach. Only at the occasion of great collective rituals, they do feel free to be

![Fig. 31: Young women are usually serving men in the course of big collective meals. They stand by behind the guests, waiting to refill their rice bowl and hand them a cup of tea before they leave the table.](image)

![Fig. 32: They will eat in their turn when all the males have finished and withdrawn.](image)
more convivial, for they know that their contribution in preparing paper, then feeding the assembly of priests and acolytes three meals a day, is essential. They are also a silent audience, watching the great ritual show when they are not busy cooking. However, they keep staying in the kitchen area and at the entrance, their usual quarters in the house. They seem to follow quite well the overall meaning of the ritual performance although they are not literate in Chinese characters. (Recently, they have shown at school that they were quite good at learning Lao writing.) Nevertheless, they are clever at expressing their romantic feelings in very sophisticated poetic verses they sing together in unison.

Fig. 33: The Ta Fak young ladies have come to sing antiphonal songs with the guests from Pa Kha at the end of the Chai ritual.

Fig. 34: Men, here the two masters, Ta Tut and Ta Do, and Ta Gyau from Pa Kha are transcribing the Ta Fak ladies’ verses in order to prepare the appropriate poetic answer that Ta Gyau will sing to them.
This is the start for a session of antiphonal songs between men and women. It is quite amazing to see these self-styled scholars feverishly transcribing these women’s verses (“We are young and healthy trees and yet no bird has dwelled on us”) and writing their answer on a piece of paper before singing it.

What is going on later in the night, when the girls go back home and men feel a sudden urge to go out, should be left to imagination. It is heart-breaking enough to admit that such innocent and refreshing customs need be thoroughly investigated in the light of HIV epidemics. So far as we know, Lanten girls who, in Vietnam according to Bonifacy (1906), were nicknamed by French soldiers “the gipsy girls of the 5th Territory”, enjoy a measure of sexual freedom. From this point of view, these nice ladies could well be the open gate to the virus, in case a distant villager or a stranger would raise their curiosity and be given the opportunity to satisfy it. If it does not necessarily kill the cat, it may well introduce a dangerous parameter in the equation of collective protection through a strongly homogeneous community that the villagers are presenting as their response to HIV menace. Early marriage and swift remarriage of widows and widowers may turn an individual mishap into a village and district disaster.

Obviously, the villagers, duly informed by recent prevention campaigns, think they can feel safe with the entire social, moral and religious guardrails they have. And by doing so, they are the perfect victims-to-be in case of accidental unpredictable infection.

9. Conclusion: HIV/AIDS Vulnerability

I have already pointed out the big weakness in the follow up, after a rather successful prevention campaign: the striking absence of a condom distributor at the village level. He could be the village headman, the schoolteacher or even Ta It, the shopkeeper. Obviously, somebody is missing a logical link in the message he wants to convey.

This is true that Lanten Yao social fabric is tightly knitted up and can mend most social mishaps like the loss of kin, the death of spouse, of children etc. This is also true that genetic contacts with other groups are made through adoption rather than intermarriage. But even when sticking to their fellow tribesmen in the lottery of love, the particular restricted group of Kim Di Mun, scattered, as they are, sometimes travels far away to find their wife. They also like to travel buying and selling commodities and the young men are conscript in the army, except if they are their parents’ only son. Do they really never try sexual partners from other groups? Pessimistic forecasts would point at the proximity from the national road as a factor of increased risk, with the possibility that truck drivers would stop at their village. But my experience shows that this risk is practically nonexistent in their case.

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Sleeping in the only guesthouse and brothel of Muang Long, I have not witnessed any Yao woman coming to visit for money-making like the Lisu women used to do in Chiangmai according to Otome Klein Hutheesing (Regional Conference on the Cultural Factors in the Transmission, Prevention and Care of HIV/AIDS in the Upper Mekong Region, June 10-16th 1999, Chiang Mai). But I cannot swear so far it has never existed, as surprising as it would be to me. To be true, when I was downtown, Yao women never even attended the market nearby. If I am not mistaken, they would rather go to Muang Long in mid-morning, only to buy needles and thread.

In close neighborhood to Lao and Chinese cultures where the problem of HIV infection is further increased by different cognitive rationale screening prevention campaigns\textsuperscript{14}, the Kim Di Mun seem so far quite open to a Western approach of this epidemics, as long as they have not yet experienced the disease. They offer a very useful cultural sample for testing our straightforward prevention campaigns, which would not meet the same 100% positive response with more sophisticated Lao for instance. But we still have to help them avoiding a disastrous kickback.

If we really want to implement a policy of “early warning -- rapid response”, more in-depth research should be conducted in their mortality rates and circumstances of death. A record of those dying at Muang Long hospital should be kept and, of course, blood tests should be available for them.

For the anthropologists, it is a great pity that, in all likelihood, they may have dropped a whole sphere of their culture about their system of healing by the plants and the accompanying concepts on the origins, etiology and prevention of disease, preferring Western medicine at the hospital, and keeping only the tradition of supernatural causes of illness that they identify through the exploration of the unseen by a shaman in trance. Shaman’s direct intervention in the unseen remains, indeed, their only response to psychosomatic disorders.

The Lanten show no hint of gender prejudice against women and do not have such dialectics of STDs and AIDS being woman’s diseases as the Lao, Thai and Khmer do\textsuperscript{15}. They quite modernly call a blennorrhoea by its Lao name: nong nai, and have no particular speculation about its origins, except, maybe, for Ta Kaeng (in Ta Fak) whose case has been elucidated.

Finally, a better understanding of their sexual behavior in time of sexual license, such as New Year for instance, or of the impact of VCD blue movies watched by some of them, would no doubt shed some light on the extent of common risk through individuals.


\textsuperscript{15} On the Khmer, see Maurice Eisenbruch, 1999, \textit{Rapport de mission: The Crouching Mango, Sex, Contagion and Culture in Cambodia}, CACSPI, ANRS, CNRS
Education is certainly the key word in planning the future and it has already met with a positive response – they have at least shown their interest for Lao courses -- but it must be matched with a corresponding economic development. In Pa Kha’s case, there is a growing inequality in living conditions between this village and Ta Fak, its associate community on the other side of the Nam Ma River. The villagers of both villages agree on a project of launching a bridge across the Nam Ma in order to ease Ta Fak’ s access to the road in all seasons and also facilitate their mutual relations, which are quite frequent. This bridge, which the other Lue, Kui Sung or Akha villagers could use as well, would enable them to reach Muang Long hospital in time and reinforce the trend towards modernization among all of them. This is my hope and theirs that such a bridge will soon be undertaken.

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APPENDIX A

Mission Schedule

28 November 2001

P.M. Arrive Vientiane

29 November 2001

9.0 Meeting with Mr. Bounkhong Thoummavong, Deputy Director General of the Department of Non-Formal Education. He is quite interested in my mission, but doubts I can proceed immediately to Luang Namtha, without meeting first with Mr. Heng who is in Luang Phrabang and will not return until next Saturday. I ask him if he as any document on what has been done already. He gives me a copy of his last report and shows me a prevention booklet in Lao to be sent to the schoolteachers in the country, asking me to read it and comment.

30 November 2001

Bounkhong and one of his colleagues visit me. They want to know for how long I intend to stay in Muang Long, because they think some of them could come along. My answer that I am commissioned for one-month fieldwork cools down their enthusiasm to go with me. They leave me repeating that only Mr. Heng Daovannary, Secretary General of the Lao National Commission for UNESCO, to whom I carry a letter of introduction from UNESCO Bangkok, can make the necessary credentials for my research. On the top of it, on Sunday, the Lao PDR is celebrating its anniversary and the whole of the administration will be on holiday until next Wednesday….

1, 2, 3, 4 December 2001

I try to take the best of this long forced delay and use my time reviewing my data on the Lanten Yao in China and Vietnam (in my past Journey diaries). I also start studying Father Savina’s dictionary, the only one ever made of this language, dating back in 1926. I also read carefully the prevention data book from Mr. Bounkhong’s office and prepare some corrections and remarks. His report gives me more insight into what has already been done in Muang Long area: at least a visit and a meeting with the Lanten villagers.

5 December 2001

10.0 A tip from Mr. Bounkhong has informed me that Mr. Heng returned to his office and is waiting for my visit. Mr. Bounkhong takes me to his office. He examines my introducing letter from UNESCO Bangkok and says that he cannot send me alone and that I need to take along some member of the
project from Vientiane. He proposes Mr. Hongthong Phouangphachan, Deputy-Director of Upgrading Education and Vocational Promotion Division. I shall pay for all his travel expenses. Mr. Hongthong will take me to Luang Namtha’s government, then to Muang Long District and finally to the village. We will fly on the next day and Mr. Hongthong will bring along my credentials from Mr. Heng.

6 December 2001

11.30 As agreed, I meet Mr. Hongthong at the airport. The takeoff of this Chinese Y model plane is rather late, but when the worse comes to the worse, this is not the end of the story. After a ten-minute fly, it returns to Vientiane: the compass on board is not working, we might get lost in the clouds floating over the mountains. During the one-and-half-hour repairing time, I invite Mr. Hongthong for a lunch at the airport restaurant. I take the opportunity to talk with him. He knows Luang Namtha, Muong Sing and Muong Long quite well although he originally comes from Pakse. He has a number of stories about sexual freedom among young Akha girls (Mr. Bounkhong has already shown me in Vientiane his pictures of their small huts for receiving lovers besides their parent’s houses). As a fan of country brothels, he also knows a lot about wandering young prostitutes from the South (especially Pakse, his home city), spending three weeks here, three weeks there all over the country. He regrets that people do little use of available condoms, although ethnic minorities seem more open to it than the Lao themselves. He takes out of his pocket three samples of a kind of “cultural” condoms: one comes along a pocket calendar, another with a folding telephone book, an ideal gift for a call girl I suppose. They are printed with Lao characters but are all manufactured in Thailand. At this point, the plane is ready to take off again.

We arrive in Luang Namtha at 3.30 PM. Fortunately, Mr. Khamla from the Education Office is waiting for us with a car. After desperately waiting for our luggage, it is just time to race to his office where we meet Mr. Bouncanh, the head of the Non Formal Education Bureau, another friend of Mr. Hongthong. He is a man of action. Tomorrow, together with Mr. Khamla, he will take us personally to Muong Long. Now, it is time to have a late lunch together at the brand new Lao Food Restaurant. A dinner party and introduction (for me) to the nights of Luang Namtha is also provided. I manage to escape, saying that I am too tired (this is true; I woke up before sunrise this morning in order to fix up all my fieldwork equipment).

7 December 2001

Very early, we visit Mr. Singkham Phantavong, Deputy Provincial Governor, who provides me with an approval for doing fieldwork in Muang Long that he writes directly on my credentials. He is worried with all the tourists going in full planes to the Sipsong Panna and who are going to extend their trip to Laos one coming day. He seems genuinely committed to protect the ethnic diversity of Luang Namtha and he likes the idea that I am not a fresh man but rather an old trustable Lao hand that is not going to
make trouble because I know the country, the language and the people and thus will meet their expectations.

The old Chinese road to Muang Sing is in worse state than in my previous trip in 1996 and Muang Sing is now looking like a budding Katmandu or Dali, with all these stunned and amazing tourists from everywhere on earth, trying to escape bevies of Akha and Tai Dam women selling their handicraft. After a quick lunch, we take the dirt national road to Muang Long and Xieng Kok.

Once in Muang Long, we first visit the director of Education, Mr. Bouchanh Homkinkeo, who delegates his deputy, Mr. Houmphanh Chantavong, to take us to Ban Pa Kha after a courtesy visit to the head of the district. There, we are met by Mr. Vathong, the director of the district administration office, his superior being busy with visitors from the Party. He will report later on and agrees to provide me with lodging in his guesthouse and a car to go to Pa Kha in the following days. We then continue on the road to Pa Kha, 3.5 km, from Muang Long on the way to Xieng Kok.

We finally arrive in Ban Pa Kha at the house of the schoolteacher where the actual village headman, Ta Tut, and his predecessor, Ta Ngaeng, are waiting for us. The schoolteacher is a Tai Dam married to a young Tai Khao who has just delivered a baby and is lying close to the fire in her kitchen, attended by her mother. My two Lanten interlocutors are quite interested in knowing they are not the first ones I meet. I verify that they really are Kim Di Mun as I expected and I mention also that I have met other Kim Mun and even Heo Mun in China and Vietnam. They know the word Heo Mun, for them Hiu Mun which means Yao [hiu] Mun, and consider it is not a different group, “it’s the same a hong”. They say they come from Vietnam and I show them the copy I have made in Bangkok of Savina’s dictionary of their language some 75 year ago. Mr. Bouchanh wants to show my colleagues a new area of vegetable gardens by the Nam Ma for which the Education has provided seeds. We can reach it with our pickup car at the end of a dirt path, crossing bushes of giant *Eupatorium odoriferum*. Mr. Bouchanh shows us that, even though they don’t get miraculous results, it is still much better than the neighboring Kui Sung village of Phonsamphan who got no result at all. The fact is that, even being quite close to the Nam Ma, their watering cans are not adapted to this dry soil and they have probably never seen the quantity of water poured on their vegetables by the Vientiane gardeners on the banks of the Mekong. A simple water pump would cut short a lot of trouble and painstaking experiences.

After this introductory visit, my mentors take me back to Muang Long’s only guesthouse where Mr. Vathong welcomes me. There is a big double bed room with a kind of a bathroom for me and, last but not least, with electricity for my computer from 6 to 8.30 at night. My companions then leave me. They want to dine and sleep in Muong Sing where there also seems to be a nightlife. I provide Mr. Hongthong with the money he will need on the way and in Namtha until his departure for Vientiane.

8 December 2001
I have been waiting for the car but the first to arrive are Mr. Houmphanh and Mr. Khamphan Phongsavath, director of Non-Formal Education. The two young men, who say they are the two local persons in charge of the UNESCO project, ask me about the car when suddenly it comes, and takes Houmphanh and me to the village. We go straight to Ta Tut’s house. As I expected, he speaks a very good Lao language, and it is a pleasure to speak with him; I take the opportunity to check his Mun language helped by Savina’s dictionary. Their language is apparently the same as the one collected in the 1920’s by the French missionary among the Xanh Y of the First Military Area of Haininh. In fact, as these Kim Di Mun here arrived in Laos by the end of the 19th century, their language could be earlier. For instance, they do not use such consonant clusters such as [xl] and say [xong] to plant, instead of [xlong] as Savina’s Xanh Y. [xl] could be a later development in Vietnam. They had the visit of Jinping Mun, who look to them very much identical, and of 2 girls and 4 boys of Mengla who seemed to them quite different, in spite of their charming singing. They remember their coming in Vietnam through Hekou in Yunnan and Lao Cai along the Red River. I also try a quick checking of Chazée’s notes, and start realizing the gap between professionals, whether linguist or anthropologist, and an amateur ethnographer. Nothing is very much reliable in his records… Mr. Houmphanh, who has patiently listened to all this exchange of information about subjects completely new to him, says he wishes to visit Phonsamphan, the Kui Sung village where a handful of Lao teachers are trying to teach young Kui Sung how to speak Lao, first step to penetrate a rather hostile community. It is easy to go with the car at our disposal. In no time, we are at the school compound where six, male and female, young teachers are living together in thatched, dirt-floored, buildings (like their classrooms) while a concrete house is being built for them. They have a TV set and a satellite receiver. They say they use TV to attract Kui Sung children before schooling them.

We return to Pa Kha where headman Tut has prepared a *lap pa* for Mr. Houmphanh with a fresh fish from his own fishpond, *bjau gang* in Mun. Attending are the schoolteacher, two villagers I don’t know and Ta Ngaeng, the former headman who seems to monitor his successor sometimes in much the same way, I will discover it later, as the priest master monitors his disciples. The other two must be prominent members of the standing committee (*khana*) of the village. At first glance, here, responsibilities are shared but the decision is much in the hand of the headman. And obviously, Mr. Houmphanh has found a way to attract his interest about my inquiry in the village: UNESCO, he says, sends me to assess their situation and write a report. This is time for the headman to list his priorities, and I will pass them on. Short of any idea, Ta Tut, seeing a baby cat playing around, says that what they want the most are cats. Rats here are a plague and they first used poison resulting in the death of poultry and pigs. Now they are trying to breed cats, which seem better and not dangerous, but they have to borrow them from neighboring villages. A couple of cats given to the village would be must appreciated. Houmphanh, like a true politician, gently insists: “Find out what UNESCO project can do for your village, for instance water pumps for your vegetable gardens etc.”. Intrigued, they want to know for how long I will stay for my inquiry and what I want to check about AIDS prevention.
I explain that I am going to stay for a few weeks and that I first need to know them better. When I know their village community, I shall focus on special inquiries…

9 December 2001

On our way back to Muang Long, Mr. Houmphanh announces that he will be busy in the coming days and cannot go with me to the village, but can find somebody else… My straight answer is that I don’t need any help except for transportation. The administration car may not be available every day, so it would be better if I could borrow or hire a motorbike to go to the village. Hiring is not possible, he says, but he can find somebody to take me to the village in the morning and fetch me back in the late afternoon… Today, the first of this arrangement, I am waiting again but finally somebody turns up with a big Suzuki motorbike, given by an EU program. I buy for him three liters of gasoline and he sends me to the village. This arrangement will work for about three days with a different driver and bike everyday, then on the fourth, seeing nobody coming, I walk to the Education school compound and meets Mr. Bouchananh asking him to send me to Pa Kha. He finds a last big Suzuki motorbike apparently belonging to his office and somebody to ride me there. I tell him that I will stay three days in the village and will need to be fetched back only on Saturday afternoon. But this is not a working day and there will be nobody coming then. From that time on, I shall use public transportation when available or hitchhiking. Nobody from the administration ever inquired about me either. Village happenings were much more interesting anyway. Today, when I arrive late, the schoolteacher tells me that headman Tut is gone to buy a pig to the neighboring Key Sung village, in fact in their swidden settlement in the mountain because the Kui Sung do not like to live by the road. There is a big ritual to come on December 12…

My schedule has to adapt to the village events and is restructured as follows:

9 December –12 December 2001

Mapping the village, identifying the clans, then the householder’s name, and then starting a house-to-house population inquiry. I sleep in Muang Long, buy meat and vegetables at dawn in Muang Long market, then goes to the village, shares my lunch with the house of the headman, his deputy etc.

12 December –15 December 2001

I watch the Major Fast ritual held in Headman Tut’s house while continuing my inquiry on the population. I sleep in Ta Kaet’s house -- his brother-in-law and deputy. I miss a lot of the show but refrain from showing too much interest in their ritual and becoming a worry for them. When everybody is gone, I ask Ta Tut to help me understand the broad meaning of it. He is quite happy to explain me what he has just done. This ‘soft’ ethnographic approach will be a rewarding policy for the next ritual. He tells me that there is another ritual to come in Ta Fak. This time, he will be the Sai Kong
master exorcist, and Ta Do, who was Sai Kong in his ritual, will be the Tao Kong in Ta Fak. Why don’t I go with them and watch it once more? I readily agree of course! We then talk about STDs in the village. There may be only one case, a girl from Pa Kha married in Ta Fak. I also learn about the incredible story of her husband, Ta Kaeng’s gonorrhea, and another reason for visiting Ta Fak.

16 December – 18 December 2001

I spend a whole morning at the schoolteacher’s house and learn from both husband and wife about their working conditions and the goals they aim at. Ta Kaet helps me review my notes on the population, family ties, and kin system. I start inquiring about traditional herb medicine and am told that there does not exist any more healers with the plants. After lunch, I project my videotape on Ta Tut’s ta chai ritual in Ta Paw’s house with a great audience. On the 17th, Tut is gone again when I arrive and Kaet has disappeared. Ta Ngaeng has been assigned to take care of me. We take my computer to Ta Paw’s house and I show him my video while asking questions on detailed parts of the ritual. I also answer his questions on myself and we become good friends.

18 December: They are all gone again, but Yot and other minor householders want me to go and see the places for the water pumps they heard I was suggesting. In fact, they will explain to me that what they really want is to dig some additional deep ditches with the help of a mechanical digger in order to skirt round two heights they show me. When we return from the rice fields, Tut is back home and is rather upset by their initiative, and tells me that what they really want is a bridge on the Nam Ma. He is a good politician and expects that with a bridge Ta Fak and Pa Kha could be united under the same leadership.

19 December--22 December 2001

I have left the guesthouse saying to the lady in charge I shall be away for a few days. I spend this day inquiring about herbal medicine, with no more result, and STDs. The action has shifted away to Ta Fak to where, in the late afternoon, I trudge along the road, then across the Nam Ma on the makeshift bamboo bridge and across the Lue village of Nong Kham, the rice fields and bushes etc., led by Ta Tut’s youngest son, Ta Paen. I have spent no less than one and a half hour. The two masters, Ta Do and Ta Tut, who have set out well after me, arrive almost at the same time! This time I shall sleep with them in the middle of the action. My visit is not questioned and there is a favorable impression about me - who maybe will bring them a bridge… I show them Chazée’s book where they find two pictures of their village. But the ritual is already starting. This time, Ta Do, who steals the show from Ta Tut, easily helps me. He is such a fine scholar! Because most of the time they stay and direct the action from the bed, where the guests, including me, are sitting, he and Ta Tut are able to explain to me what is going on.

1 Her case and her husband’s are detailed in the last paragraph of chapter 6.
I also draw a map of Ta Fak and achieve a population study during intermissions. They also take me to the place where they want to build a bridge and provide me at my departure with an official request well written in good Lao by some of their sons. When I want to return, it is already late and I walk half my way to Muang Long before being carried on a motorbike by a sympathetic passer-by.

23 December 2001

Today will be my last day in Pa Kha. Inquiring with Mr. Houmphanh about a car to take me back early to Muang Sing where I can find a regular bus to Namtha, I was finally replied that no administrative car was available. Fortunately, at the guesthouse, the guests next room have a car. I have talked to them this morning while eating a soup together. They leave tomorrow morning and are willing to take me to Muang Sing… Ta Tut has gone to the ‘forest’ with most of the men from the village. I find only Ta Ngaeng and Ta Do and spend a very interesting day with both these experienced villagers, checking various data on religion, STDs, AIDS prevention, etc.

24 – 25 December 2001

My three fellow travelers are working for UNDP on “road from village to village” projects. They came to inspect Muong Long district, a good opportunity to talk of the bridge. Two of them are engineers, one educated in Ukraine and the other in Vietnam. They take me to Muang Sing and I offer them a lunch, Then, they take me to a pickup bus leaving to Namtha. I shall spend this Christmas Eve at the Palanh guesthouse. Next morning, when trying to find a plane to Vientiane on next Wednesday or Thursday and learning they are fully booked, I hear that there is space available on a plane flying in the afternoon. There is no choice

26-27 December 2001

Back in Vientiane, I try to reach Mr. Bounkhong. I can only find Mr. Hongthong, saying that Mr. Heng and Mr. Boukhong are away for a couple of days. I tell him to say goodbye for me. I shall see them when I come back.

28 December 2001

I fly back to Bangkok.
Here is the Ta Fak and Pa Kha villagers’ petition for a bridge on the Nam Ma:

It may be translated as follows:

“Lao People’s Democratic Republic,
Peace, Independence, Democracy, Unity, Prosperity
Ban Ta Fak, Muang Long, Luang Namtha Province

Petition
To

The Director of the UNESCO Project against AIDS

The Administrative Committee of Ban Ta Fak, in the name of the area, submits this proposal to the UNESCO project:
We want to ask for the help of the UNESCO Project in building a bridge on the Nam Ma river where many villages are situated and also think asking for help such as: Ban Ta Fak, Ban Pa Kha, Ban Don Sahong, Ban Nong Kham, Ban Cha Kham Ton, Ban Bo Nua, Ban Bo Tham Tai, Ban Ayang, and there are many villages which could be added to this list…. (The petitioner wants to submit more).
Accordingly, we submit this proposal to the UNESCO Project, which takes care of smoothing, and improving life conditions along the lines of this call for help.

In Ban Ta Fak, 22, 12, 2001,

For the Village Administrative Committee,

Th. Mao