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Heritage of Diversity

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(Laotian Americans) out

Loas!

Kingdom of a million elephants and white parasols, fields nodding with golden poppies, the tall spires of Buddhist pagodas—Laos mixes rich images. Geographical diversity underlies many of them, nurturing deep cultural, economic, and ethnic differences.

Landlocked, Laos' centers of commerce and agriculture cluster along the Mekong River. Tributaries drain rugged mountains and plateaus sheltering villages of tribes and clans which fled southern China 150 years ago. Lack of a developed internal transportation system and natural divisions of lowlands, dense jungle, and mountain peaks provide a backdrop for the coexistence of cultural groups varying in countless ways: language, clothing, methods of agriculture, religion, ethnic origin, and political affiliations.

The Lao people descended from Thai who migrated south from China in the thirteenth century. Of a national population never much over 3 million, only half are ethnic Lao. They control the lowland valleys of the Mekong River where rice is grown in wetlands. Ease of river transportation and abundant harvests helped the lowland Lao maintain political and cultural dominance in this country not much bigger than the state of Kansas.

To the north, in the mountains, dwell seven Thai tribes, including Thai-Dam. These groups distinguish themselves from each other by dialects and color of dress. Near them live descendants of

limited self-government in 1949, with a constitution and general elections. However, Prince Souphanouvong, the newly elected president, and his followers were unwilling to accept the French presence. A new political movement, the Pathet Lao, literally meaning Lao Country, began in 1950. Concentrated in remote mountain hideouts, they joined with the Vietminh of Vietnam to purge the French from their lands.

When the First Indochina War ended, the Geneva Accords established Laos as a unified, independent buffer state between Thailand, allied to the West, and North Vietnam, allied to the communist bloc. While internationally the agreement was acceptable, within Laos the new coalition government was unstable. Internal developments also became increasingly linked with events in Vietnam. Part of the North Vietnamese supply line, the Ho Chi Minh Trail, ran through Laos. The North Vietnamese gave aid to the Pathet Lao in the mountainsides. *Guerrilla activity heated up throughout Laos*

In U.S. foreign policy terms, the Royal Lao needed aid to fight the Pathet Lao. The North Vietnamese posed a threat to both Laos and South Vietnam. In keeping with SEATO aims, U.S. technical and military advisors as well as United States Agency for International Development (USAID) personnel went into Laos.

Americans in Laos in the early 1960s provided various forms of aid. Some inoculated against disease, pieced together pumps to irrigate rice fields, or built roads. Under USAID programs they also spread throughout the countryside as recreation leaders, teachers, foresters, and specialists in animal husbandry. Talented pilots in cowboy hats flew rice deep into the mountains. They landed on scrubby airfields hewn out of mountainsides to deliver grain and guns to enemies of the Pathet Lao.

Meanwhile guerrilla activity heated up throughout Laos. The Pathet Lao dominated the mountain jungles full of places to hide from Royal Lao forces. Because Laos' population was divided into small villages, the heads of hamlets, clans, and tribal groups could swing loyalties one way or the other. The Royal Lao government held the Mekong River region. North Vietnamese controlled the Ho Chi Minh Trail in the north. The mountains split between the Pathet Lao allied with the North Vietnamese and Hmong tribesmen allied with the Royal Lao government.

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An idyllic postcard shot of fishermen on the Mekong River between Thailand and Laos contrasts with many refugees' memories of the river—a border teeming with Thai guards and Pathet Lao soldiers intent on blocking refugee escape. (Anonymous)

American intelligence watched this build-up and the shifting political currents in Vietnam. Eventually the CIA moved into the mountains to recruit support for the Royal Lao government. Members of mountain tribes fought valiantly. They fired modern weapons, carried out surveillance against troop and supply movements, gathered intelligence for the U.S. forces opposing the North Vietnamese, and rescued American pilots. By the late 1960s, Hmong and Mien guerrillas fought both to disrupt communist supply lines and defend their homes.

Although the Vietnamese peace agreement was signed in 1973, rivalries erupted in Laos. Royal Lao supporters (primarily ethnic Lao of the lowlands and some mountain tribal people), neutralists, and the Pathet Lao unsuccessfully negotiated attempts at unified government. When the South Vietnamese and Cambodian capitals—Saigon and Phnom Penh—fell in 1975 and communist regimes took over, demoralized Laotian rightist leaders and soldiers, as well as merchants, fled to Thailand. The Pathet Lao moved rapidly, establishing control and founding the Lao People's Democratic Republic.

Flights from chaos

What followed resembled what happened in Vietnam. People fled the threat of forced work on communes. Food supplies dwindled. Rather than starve, lowland people pushed toward Thailand where huge camps formed to receive them until other nations would accept them for resettlement. Drought intensified poor harvests. Guerrilla fighting tore apart village life. Refugees told of the repression of civil liberties and religious freedoms. They also spoke of executions.

In the mountains, Pathet Lao took vengeance on those who had opposed them. Agonizing journeys began of the elderly, children, wounded soldiers, and women who trudged over mountain passes toward the Mekong River. Casualty figures ran high.

Nearly a tenth of Laos' population has sought refugee status since 1975. Reports trickle out of Laos of continuing subversive operations aimed against the communists. Refugees in the United States whisper among themselves about going back to fight again. Mutual Assistance Associations organize to send money to help anti-government forces or relatives in camps. One lowland Lao man describes their faith: "We donate money—so much per member per month. We save it up to send home to refugees in Thailand. We take a chance. There may be corruption, but we just do it. We don't expect 100% results. We hope some of the money will go to Laos to resistance forces. Maybe it will go for Anacin and beer . . . Maybe it will help."

Meanwhile, the United Nations sends medical supplies and agricultural equipment in a relief program designed to support the fragile Lao economy. Hope grows that fewer people will leave and

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The village of Vang Vieng, pictured in the 1960s, seems distant from worldly cares. Refugees from such villages recall cycles of dysentery from polluted water, storing rice in huts on stilts to foil rats, and the overpowering odors from unpenned animals and birds. They appreciate American luxuries like refrigeration and electric lights. (Galen Beery)

not that some refugees in Thai camps will return to Laos.

The people of Laos, now people of America, for all their support of anti-communist forces back home, shyly confess they know they will never return. At the same time, they maintain the ethnic identifications that defined them in Asia. Only the lowland Lao call themselves Lao as a first label. To the Hmong and Mien, their tribal identities are most important, defining their religions, clan structures, and sense of history.

Lao, Hmong, Mien, and even small Thai groups understand that U.S. agencies classify them all as Lao. Statistics that report Lao refugees have the lowest average earned income or highest dependency on cash assistance of all the Southeast Asian refugees do not distinguish ethnic groups. When sponsors and government

agencies speculate that Lao refugees face more difficult social and vocational adjustments in resettlement than either Kampuchean or Vietnamese refugees, again the tendency is to blend what in Laos was understood and appreciated: rich diversity.

Lowland Lao

"One night a young boy set a bamboo fish trap in a small river. When he examined the trap the next morning, he was surprised to find it empty. Looking more carefully, at the bottom he discovered some fish scales and bones. He straightened up and muttered to himself, 'Who stole my fish?' Eager the next day to return home with fish in hand, he approached the trap . . . he found only scales and bones. Turning away from the trap he noticed a line of footprints in the mud and guessed that children had interfered with his trap. Angrily he followed the footprints to where the river broadened out into a lake. Keeping his eyes on the footprints, he followed them forward until an evil forest spirit standing at the end of the chain of footprints startled him. Without hesitation, the boy said to the forest spirit, 'My fish trap is empty. Where are my fish? You stole them.' The evil forest spirit shook his head in reply. 'I did not rob your trap.' The boy clenched his fists. 'I followed these footprints all the way from my trap. They lead directly to you.' The evil spirit glanced at the boy. 'You talk too much. If you say anything more against me, I will eat you. Right here. Right now.' 'That means you are guilty. You ate all my fish,' the boy complained more quietly. He knew now where his fish had gone, but he knew by the tone in the evil forest spirit's voice he was helpless. Without another word, the boy turned to retrace his steps home. He never returned to where his trap had been to try to catch any more fish."

If the ending of this lowland Lao folk tale seems surprising, it may be because American culture praises heroes who vanquish villains: from the Biblical David to Superman and Wonderwoman. The boy's acceptance of the evil forest spirit's power is puzzling, as if this cannot possibly be the end of the story. Americans want underdogs to fight back and, eventually, to win.

This simple tale suggests that cultural assumptions of many Southeast Asians differ from the American norm. Just as the Vietnamese habit of ancestor reverence may not fit America's adoration of youthfulness, neither does the Lao awareness of the *pei*—spirits of the dead and nature who must be appeased to protect

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Lao Americans