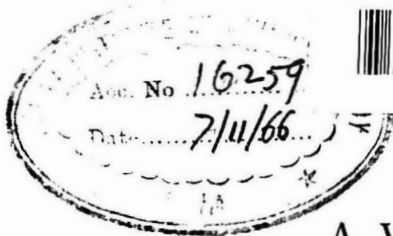




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A VISIT TO LAOS

By MR. PETER KEMP, D.S.O.

Report of a lecture delivered to the Royal Central Asian Society on Wednesday, February 22, 1961, General Sir Richard Gale in the chair.

The CHAIRMAN: Ladies and Gentlemen: It gives me great pleasure this afternoon to introduce Mr. Peter Kemp to you. He is going to talk, as you know, on a very interesting subject. I thought you might like to know something of his background, which is exciting and stimulating, and when you hear of his background I think you will be able to appreciate how it is that he gets around the world and forms opinions which must be helpful to society.

In 1936, for instance, he took part in the Spanish Civil War, on the Nationalist side; he joined the Carlos Cavalry and then the Spanish Foreign Legion and ended up as a Lieutenant and was wounded four times. That is not bad going! He was awarded the Spanish Croix de Guerre and the Cross of Military Merit.

Then in the 1939-45 war he served with the Commandos, and then with the Special Operations Branch. He was parachuted into Albania in August, 1943, and spent nine months there and in Montenegro, in the mountains, where he organized resistance and guerilla activities.

In 1944 he was dropped into Poland and was working with the underground until he was imprisoned.

In 1945 he was parachuted into Siam, before the Japanese surrender, and ran a chain of intermediate stations and missions on the frontier between Siam and Laos. He was there at the beginning of the Viet-minh rebellion. From February to June, 1946, he was in Indonesia, commanding the Advanced Allied Mission which liberated Bali and Lombok.

He was demobilized in 1945 with the D.S.O. and mentioned in despatches.

Now, Ladies and Gentlemen, I could go on reading this, but I don't think I need say more to you today, except that I have let you know how very experienced and how very gallant a lecturer we are to hear.

MR. PETER KEMP, D.S.O.: Mr. Chairman, My Lords, Ladies and Gentlemen: Recovering with difficulty from that most kind and charitable introduction of our Chairman's, I must warn you that you are probably in for a terrible let-down and disappointment, because whatever my experience may be it does not include lecturing. The last time I gave a lecture was twenty-one years ago, as an Officer Cadet at Weedon. The lecture was supposed to last an hour. It was about the Spanish Civil War. Attendance was voluntary and, at the end of half an hour, my audience consisted of one person—my Troop Commander, whose good manners did not allow him to leave. I would like to assure you straight away that you need feel yourselves under no such obligation!

Another thing that worries me is that, when addressing a learned society like this, the audience most certainly will know more about Asian affairs than the lecturer.

This lecture is entitled "A Recent Visit to Laos," but it seems that my own experience there can be of little comparative im-



portance, in fact of no importance, and comparatively little interest, but what I would like to do is first to give you some idea of the background of the country, of the historical, political and economic background, and also of the events which led up to the present crisis; and then, if there is time, I can perhaps mention a few points from my own personal experience.

(The lecturer then indicated geographical features on a map: the position of Laos; from Yunnan in the North; North Vietnam to the East; Burma and Siam to the West; Cambodia and South Vietnam to the South; Southern part of Laos, a narrow strip extending down the Eastern bank of the Mekong River to the Cambodian border.)

Laos covers an area of 91,150 square miles. Its population is about a million and a half, of which only 3,000 are Chinese. Those of you who know South-East Asia will realize what a very small proportion this is; and it shows you how very little developed Laos is commercially and industrially.

Now I am going into the back history a bit, because it is, I think, important, in that historical factors tend to affect the pattern of political events of a country.

The origins of the Tai-Lao people, as the race is called, can be found in the great Nan-Chao kingdom in South-West China, which was founded in the year A.D. 629 and destroyed a little over 600 years later by Kublai Khan; but, long before its destruction, the Tai people were gradually forced by relentless Chinese pressure out of that part of China, and they were forced westward and southward. They did, in fact, reach Bangkok, but on their way they founded a number of what I think we can call "remnant kingdoms," and the most important of them was the kingdom of Luang-Prabang. The Royal House of Luang-Prabang still provides the Laotian dynasty, and Luang-Prabang, the town, is the royal capital of Laos today, although Vientiane is the administrative capital.

The earliest unit that could be termed Laos appears in the fourteenth century as a group of small Tai Muongs—that is, states—which had formed themselves as powerful malignant growths on the body of the decaying Khmer Empire. A word about the Khmer. The Khmer Empire, as you know, was that great Cambodian power which flourished from before the ninth century A.D. to 1430, when the Siamese burned Angkor. Its two great monuments were Angkor Wat and Angkor Thom. It was a Hindu Empire first and Buddhist later. It ruled, at the height of its power, Cambodia; large parts of what is now Vietnam; Laos as far north as Vientiane; and, of what is now Siam, all Siam east of the Meenam Valley and, indeed, some territory west of it. As I say, it was destroyed in 1430 by the Siamese.

The most important of these Tai Muongs was Luang-Prabang, called Muong Swa, with Vientiane, called Muong Chan and Xieng Khouang, called Muong Phoueunh, which were held together by common allegiance to the rulers of Luang-Prabang. The southern Muong of Champassak emerged as an independent kingdom later, and she was under a Siamese puppet. In 1563, the ruler of Luang-Prabang, a man called Sai Setthathirat, transferred his capital to Muong Chan, and his rule extended

over a great deal of part of North-East Siam, the Tranninh Plateau, and quite a long way south, but his kingdom disintegrated under pressure from Burma in the west and from Annam in the east.

In the seventeenth century there arose another great ruler, King of Vientiane, but of the Luang-Prabang dynasty—Soulingavongsa—and under him was the Golden Age of Laos. His dominions included Luang-Prabang, all North Laos, Xieng Khouang and Central and Southern Laos, almost to the present Cambodian border; but on his death, in 1711, dynastic quarrels caused the kingdom to disintegrate again into its separate Muongs, and each of them, except Luang-Prabang, fell under the control of a more powerful neighbour.

A century later, another great leader arose in Vientiane—Chao Anou—and he nearly reunited Laos for the third time, but he overplayed his hand and involved himself in a war with the Siamese. He tried to take Bangkok, but he was completely defeated. He was taken prisoner, taken to Bangkok, put in a cage, exhibited and fed through the bars like a wild animal until he died. Large areas of the country were occupied by the Siamese. As a result of that, in 1828, the Siamese took and burned Vientiane, and the Annamese occupied Tranninh and Xieng Khouang.

During the latter part of the nineteenth century the Ho, or Black Flag, invasions of China caused a great deal of trouble in Northern Laos, and in 1887 Luang-Prabang itself was sacked by them and almost completely depopulated.

French intervention started in 1885, at first nominally in support of the claims of the Emperor of Annam. A few years later the King of Luang-Prabang at the time, King Kham Souk (popularly known for reasons that are not quite clear as King Zacharine), called in the French to help him in a quarrel with the Siamese. As a result of a series of Franco-Siamese treaties between 1893 and 1907, a third and unified Laos was brought into being which to all intents and purposes was a French colony, although Luang-Prabang was theoretically administered through its King and Council.

Historically, two factors have tended always to influence affairs in Laos: firstly, pressure from more powerful neighbours—Annam, China, Burma in the old days, and, latterly, France; secondly, dynastic quarrels among the rulers of the various Muongs; and even today in Laos loyalties tend to revolve centrally around these old political regions. For instance, Xieng Khouang tends to gravitate towards the north-east—nowadays Communist North Vietnam: Champassak has tended always to gravitate towards Siam, because the ruler of Champassak was a Siamese puppet. In Vientiane there has been no Royal House of Vientiane for over a hundred years—since Chao Anou—and there has tended to grow up an official class whose outlook has been very much influenced by the French. Only Luang-Prabang, of all these, has not fallen under foreign domination, and Luang-Prabang really is the heartland of the Laotians.

In 1941 there was what was known as a Protectorate Treaty between the French Government, the Pétain Government and King Sisavangvong (who died last year or the year before). The King was recognized as ruler of Luang-Prabang, North and North-Eastern Laos, and Vientiane.

This, of course, recognized the unity of Laos, but not its independence.

On March 9, 1945, as many of you will remember, the Japanese launched their *coup d'état* in Indo-China. Previously, the French Government had administered the country. In March, the Japanese struck. They arrested all the Army officers they could find and murdered most of them, and took over control of the country. A guerilla resistance movement—in fact, two movements—arose against them; one consisted of escaped French officers of the *Armée Coloniale* and their Laotian levies, who fought extremely loyally and bravely beside them, and the other was a purely Laotian force, not in conjunction with the French, and its most prominent figure was someone you have probably read about in the papers, Prince Boun Oum of Champassak. Also in it were General Phoumi, General Seng and General Ouan Ratikone, all of whom are powerful military leaders in Laos today.

On August 30, 1945—after the Japanese defeat—the King of Luang-Prabang proclaimed his loyalty to France. His Viceroy and son, Prince Phetsarath, who was also his Prime Minister, in Vientiane, thought otherwise, however, and on September 1, 1945, Prince Phetsarath declared the independence of Luang-Prabang, and, on September 15, the creation of the independent kingdom of Laos, including the four southern provinces which were not previously included in the Pétain 1941 Treaty. At the same time, he announced the formation of a Provisional Government in Vientiane with himself as Prime Minister.

This movement attracted a certain amount of popular support but it was strongly opposed by Prince Boun Oum of Champassak, who saw no reason why his four southern provinces should be included, they being quite happy under him! It was also opposed by King Sisavangvong himself, but a period of house arrest imposed on him by his son caused him to change his views and he did recognize the Provisional Government.

Thus the Laotian people in the autumn of 1945 were split between those loyal to France, under Prince Boun Oum, and the Lao-Issara, or "Free Laos," under Prince Phetsarath. The Lao-Issara immediately allied themselves, though only as a temporary measure, with the Communist Viet-minh. As far as I can see, most of the Lao military leaders who are powerful today in Laos fought with this Lao-Issara; Phoumi certainly did, and Ouan Ratikone, Chief of Staff of the Army. I was involved in that a certain amount myself, because, as our Chairman has told you, I was on the Frontier at the time.

On April 24, 1946, French troops entered Vientiane, and a month later they occupied Luang-Prabang. Prince Phetsarath and his Provisional Government and many other prominent Laotians fled to Bangkok, where they formed a National Movement for Independence. Among its other leaders were Prince Souvanna Phouma, Prince Souphannouvong and a famous Laotian scholar called Katay Sasorith.

In 1949 France recognized Laos, including the southern provinces, as an Independent State, having a constitutional monarchy and a democratic form of government. (It became an Associated State in the French Union, and this agreement was superseded by Treaty in October of 1953.) As a result, the Lao-Issara dissolved itself in October, 1949, and many of its

leaders returned to Laos, at the request of the King, to take part in the life of the nation. Among them were Prince Souvanna Phouma, Katay, General Phoumi and General Ouan Ratikone. Prince Phetsarath refused at first to return but he was eventually persuaded, largely by Prince Boun Oum. The King sent for him and asked him if he would try to effect the return of the Laotian exiles, to work and try to pull the country together; and reluctantly, because he was ill at the time, he did so. The King appointed him Inspector-General of the Realm, and it was very largely thanks to Prince Boun Oum—and this should not be forgotten—that so many Laotians were reconciled and so many of their differences were healed. Furthermore, in the interests of national unity, he renounced his own rights to the Kingdom of Champassak in order that there should be no doubt that the King of Luang-Prabang was also the King of Laos. That, I think, was a sincerely patriotic gesture. General Phoumi told me later that he asked Boun Oum to take over the revolutionary movement because in his opinion Boun Oum was the most disinterested and sincere Laotian patriot.

Meanwhile, in 1949, there was a group of irreconcilables who refused to accept the Franco-Laotian Treaty or the *rapprochement* with the King, and they continued to advocate, and later to practise, militant action. Their leader was Prince Souphannouvong. It is worth saying a word here about these three Princes, Phetsarath, Souvanna Phouma and Souphannouvong. They were all sons of the old King Sisavangvong by different wives, so they were half-brothers. It seems to me that the old King must have been rather a difficult parent, because all three of these children quarrelled violently with him at one time or another, and, according to Prince Boun Oum, he more or less disowned Souphannouvong, and for a very long time Prince Souphannouvong was maintained by his brother, Prince Phetsarath. But that did not work, because of what that dour fellow John Knox calls the "monstrous regiment of women"; their wives did not get on. The wife of Phetsarath was Siamese and the wife of Souphannouvong—this is important—was Vietnamese. As a result of the disagreement between the wives, Phetsarath threw his brother out, and Souphannouvong fled to Cambodia—not Luang-Prabang—where he lived for a long time almost in destitution. It must have been a very bitter quarrel, and Phetsarath, I gathered from Boun Oum, was extremely rude to his brother. So they were non-speakers for the rest of their lives.

Now, destitute in Cambodia, Souphannouvong became an object of considerable interest to the Viet-minh. I should say that his brother, Souvanna Phouma, had married a French wife, and the French have always been the greatest champions of Souvanna Phouma—probably because they hoped through him and his French wife to re-establish the influence they had lost in Laos. Whatever the reason, there is no doubt that the Viet-minh took a considerable interest in Souphannouvong and they brought him to Hanoi and maintained him, and he finally emerged, in 1950, as the nominee—indeed, the puppet—of the Viet-minh. He emerged as the head of this movement of irreconcilables, which developed from very small beginnings into what is known now as the Pathet Lao.

The phrase "Pathet," in Laotian, means "land," "country" or

"nation," and the phrase "Pathet Lao" was the recognized term for "the land of Laos." It was therefore clever psychology of the Communists to take this term and apply it to their own organization; it gave it a patriotic flavour, disguising its real objective. I understand that this name was adopted about 1953, but the first we ever heard of it in the West, as far as I know, was at the Geneva Conference in April, 1954, when the delegate from North Vietnam got up and said that his government could not recognize any administration in Laos that did not include representatives of the Pathet Lao—the only movement, he said, that represented the true feelings and aspirations of the Laotian people.

Well, as you know, the war in Indo-China came to a close in 1954 with the disastrous débacle of Dien Bien Phu, and it was followed by the Geneva Conference. The situation in Laos at that time was very much as it is today, with the Government holding the main towns and the more accessible river valleys, but unable to prevent the Pathet Lao from organizing guerilla warfare in the mountains, forests and jungles.

As a result of their weak military position, the Royal Government had to make important concessions to the Pathet Lao, both at Geneva and later. Under the Geneva Accords, the two northern provinces of Laos—Phong Saly, almost on the Yunnan frontier, and Sam Neua—were handed over to the Pathet Lao for regrouping, prior to reintegration into the Army and the nation. The Pathet Lao have never really lost their hold on those provinces. Furthermore, an "International Commission for Supervision and Control," of which we have been hearing quite a lot, was set up in Laos, under Indian Chairmanship, with representatives of Poland and Canada as members. In its presence, the fighting gradually ceased, and the struggle for power passed, but only temporarily, from the military to the political sphere.

In December, 1956, rather more than two years later, the agreement on the integration of the Pathet Lao, which was required by the Geneva Conference, was finally confirmed between Prince Souvanna Phouma, then Prime Minister of the Royal Government, and Prince Souphanouvong, who was, of course, the Pathet Lao leader. It made two very important concessions to the Pathet Lao. One, it allowed them to form a legal political party, with ancillary organizations. This party they called the Neo Lao Hak Sat. Neo means "front"; Lao is Lao; Hak means "love"; Sat means "nation." This was another very clever piece of psychology, and thereafter the Pathet Lao was the military arm of the Neo Lao Hak Sat Party. The second concession was to allow the participation of two Pathet Lao leaders in the government; in return, the Pathet Lao unequivocally accepted the right of the Royal Government to speak for the whole nation.

The Concord included an agreement on a neutral foreign policy, and a provision that foreign aid could be accepted from whatever source the Laotian Government chose, provided there were no strings attached. She did, in fact, accept American aid to support her Army and Police, and French aid to maintain her communications, and the French also maintained a military mission in the country to train the Laotian Army.

For the next three years the political pendulum swung from Left to

Right, back again to Left, and then to Right. The details would take far too long to go into, and I am afraid would make this lecture even more confusing than it already is; but, as a reaction to the success of the N.L.H.S., the Nationalist and moderate leaders in Laos, afraid of the Communist threat, formed a party called the R.P.L., or Laotian People's Rally. A little later on, an extreme Right Wing Party called the C.D.I.N., or Committee for the Defence of the National Interests, was formed, which drew its support mostly from the Army and the youth of the country. Both these organizations united in face of the Communist threat, and a Government was formed which excluded the N.L.H.S. and included four C.D.I.N. members.

In the meantime the International Control Commission had adjourned indefinitely at the request of the Royal Government, which considered that its job was done.

The next important event—I am obliged to leave out quite a lot—was in May of 1959, when the Pathet Lao had been making a good deal of trouble about their reintegration into the Royal Army. They demanded that they should keep their own independent organization inside the main Army; this was inadmissible, and finally the Royal Government gave them an ultimatum. There were only two battalions of the Pathet Lao Army, and to these the Government said, in effect, "Integrate or be disbanded by force." One accepted the Government's terms; the other, which was stationed at Xieng Khouang, took off into the hills on the North Vietnam frontier with its arms and equipment and has been a thorn in the flesh of Governments ever since. The Government's reaction was to arrest the leaders of the N.L.H.S., including Prince Souphannouvong. It put them under arrest and later announced that it was going to bring them to trial for treason, but those trials were in fact postponed because it was rather an embarrassing situation for the Government to find itself in, with the possibility of charges of repression and similar things. Later the N.L.H.S. prisoners solved the problem by escaping and taking to the hills, which was probably a great relief to everyone concerned.

In January, 1960, the Army intervened in politics, and a military command headed by three Generals, including General Phoumi Nosavan, took over and installed a "caretaker" Right Wing Government to run the country until general elections should be held in April.

The elections of April, 1960, which, according to the Left Wing, were rigged by the Army, resulted in a landslide victory for the R.P.L. and C.D.I.N., and in June Prince Somsanith formed a strongly Right Wing Government. It was this Government that was overthrown, on August 9, 1960, by a *coup d'état* by Captain Kong Lae and his 2nd Parachute Battalion.

Now, I have heard it said by his supporters that Kong Lae is not a Communist, and the only object of his *coup* was to collect some back pay due to him and his troops and to end corruption; but his actions, after assuming power, went a good deal further than that. Judging from his subsequent behaviour, I can only say, to paraphrase the late Mr. Damon Runyan, that if he is not a Communist, he will do very nicely until a Communist comes along.

His first action was to form a Revolutionary Committee with himself as its head, and to call for the evacuation of all foreign troops and the liquidation of all foreign bases. No mention was made of the Viet-minh. He then said he was going to accept aid from every possible source—and that referred specifically to Soviet aid.

His first and most revealing action was the taking over of the arsenal of Vientiane; he distributed the arms in it to Pathet Lao detachments in the neighbourhood, and, on the pretext of a threat of Siamese invasion—more imagined than real—he mobilized a number of civilian volunteers, armed them, and, instead of keeping them in Vientiane to repel the invasion, sent them up to the north-east to the Pathet Lao.

A Soviet Embassy was accredited to Vientiane and Kong Lae organized a parachute drop in their honour.

From now onward, the Viet-Minh began to increase its aid from North Vietnam to the Pathet Lao—arms and material, almost certainly troops, and certainly instructors (officers and N.C.O.s), who were to play the most important part of all in transforming the Pathet Lao from a rather joke organization into the serious menace it is today.

Kong Lae dealt with the National Assembly in a manner reminiscent of Oliver Cromwell: he stationed his paratroopers both outside and inside the building, with sub-machine-guns at the ready, while he, from the rostrum, dictated the course of the Assembly's resolutions. A rather cynical friend of mine said it must have been the only time any of those delegates ever voted without being bribed to do so!

Meanwhile, in Luang-Prabang, the Pathet Lao and their sympathizers organized a series of demonstrations to intimidate the King—not the old King, but King Savang Vatthana, his son. The King had a very small bodyguard, which was purely ceremonial and quite useless for fighting purposes. He gave in, and he appointed Prince Souvanna Phouma as Prime Minister instead of Prince Somsanith and accepted the resignation of Prince Somsanith.

Souvanna Phouma was very welcome, because he was a good front for the activities of the Revolutionary Committee. He was supposed to be a moderate, a neutralist—and behind the cover of Souvanna Phouma, Kong Lae and the Pathet Lao were able to take over, gradually but very effectively, power in Luang-Prabang. When Souvanna Phouma, in attempting a compromise, proposed to include in his Government General Phoumi, who had been a Minister of the previous Government, Leuam Insisienmay and a man called Inpeng Suryadhai, Kong Lae refused to accept them, and Phoumi and Boun Oum themselves told me that they received written warnings from Kong Lae and the Pathet Lao that if they should appear in Luang-Prabang to take up their posts they would be liquidated. So, very sensibly, they flew straight from Luang-Prabang to Savannakhet.

That was the end of any hope of reconciliation between Left and Right, especially as, by now, foreign powers were becoming committed.

On September 10, 1960, Radio Savannakhet announced a new Revolutionary Committee, a Counter-Revolutionary Committee, led by Boun Oum and General Phoumi. The King made one more effort to reconcile Prince Boun Oum and Prince Souvanna Phouma, but it was a complete

failure, and in Vientiane control passed out of Souvanna Phouma's hands and into the hands of Kong Lae and the Pathet Lao.

Fighting went on sporadically until September, and the front was more or less stabilized at a place called Paksane. The anti-Communist troops held Xieng Khouang, and at that time nobody had Luang-Prabang at all. Then the Siamese, frightened of the Communist threat, blockaded Vientiane. Soviet Russia replied with an airlift, first of petrol and food and later of ammunition. In early November there was a *coup d'état* at Luang-Prabang headed by a parachute Major of the Third Parachute Battalion called Bouteng. This was in favour of Phoumi, and Luang-Prabang was from then on held by Bouteng's troops, although threatened by Kong Lae.

When I arrived in the middle of November, 1960, it was obvious that a trial of strength could not be long delayed. The United States and the Communist Powers were each backing up their respective protégés. Soviet aircraft were flying in arms from North Vietnam. They were not Russian arms: they were Russian planes, but the arms were French, captured mostly during the Indo-China war, and mostly at Dien Bien Phu.

The final explosion was touched off by an abortive and obviously very ill-planned *coup* by an officer called Colonel Kouprasith, a *coup d'état* in favour of Kong Lae. Colonel Kouprasith was in charge of a military camp at Chinaimo, a few miles from Vientiane. He hoped the whole Army would go over to him. That did not happen, but it at any rate sparked off Phoumi's assault. Phoumi drove Kong Lae's troops back from Paksane, and they retreated in good order to Vientiane.

On December 13, Phoumi launched his assault at Vientiane along the west road from Ta Deua. Kong Lae's troops fought magnificently, but they were out-numbered and out-gunned. By the evening of the 16th, fighting had ceased in Vientiane. Kong Lae extracted his troops extremely well and went off to the north—not pursued, for some extraordinary reason, by Phoumi.

I left Laos on December 17 and flew back to England, and that is, roughly, the political picture as it was at that time.

Now I should like to say a word about the peoples of Laos. As I have mentioned, the Laos are of Tai stock. Linguistically and racially they are closely related to the Laos on the other side of the Mekong, in Siam. They are Buddhists. This is not only their official religion, but it is practised by Laos throughout the kingdom and it is a religion which they take exceedingly seriously. Although linguistically and racially the Laos people are more akin to the Chinese, they have a background and a rather Indianized culture (with Hindu and Buddhist influences) which their ancestors have absorbed from the Khmer Empire and partly from Burma.

There are minorities. The oldest are the Kha, descendants of the pre-Tai inhabitants. They are, as far as one knows, the aboriginal inhabitants. The word Kha means "slaves," so they now have a new name for them: they call them Lao Theung. But they are a completely different race. They are found on the plateau east of Pakse, and also, under the name of Kha-Mou, in the hills around Luang-Prabang. They are small farmers, with a "slash and burn" agriculture which is very wasteful.

The other considerable minority are the Miao. They are hillmen;

their capital is Xieng Khouang. They only came into Laos in the last 150 years, from China. They are opium growers, and they also use this wasteful "slash and burn" method of agriculture. They are not Buddhists; they are pagans, ruled by sorcerers who foster their sense of isolation and of belonging to their own community. The allegiance of the Miaos is divided between the followers of a gentleman called Touby Lyfoung, who supports the Royal Government, and who has the larger following, and other Miaos called Faydang who are supporters of the Pathet Lao.

Then there is a third minority, people called Red Tais, White Tais and Black Tais. They are pockets of more or less undeveloped Tais who got left behind during the previous migrations, and are found along the Mekong in the Luang-Prabang region. They are distinguished by the colours of the women's blouses, red, white or black, and the men's belts or cummerbunds.

Except for the Touby Miaos, the minorities are generally sympathetic to the Pathet Lao, simply because so little has been done for them by successive Royal Governments.

Ninety-five per cent. of the Lao people are farmers—valley dwellers. They grow an annual crop of irrigated rice, the glutinous rice. Their farming is subsistence farming, not cash, for the large markets like Thakhek and Savannakhet are both controlled by Vietnamese and Chinese. The land is in family holdings, so there is no landlord problem, and the two basic units of society are the village and the family. Authority in the village is vested in the headman, the group of elders, and the head of the Wat or monastery.

The two great problems facing Laos now are, first, the economic problem; second, the politico-military problem.

Laos is the least exploited and developed of the countries of French Indo-China. Hardly any progress has been made in industrialization; its exports are only 20 per cent. of its imports. As far as minerals are concerned there is some tin in Boneng. There is gold, iron and coal in the north, and perhaps uranium. But the trouble is that the easiest way out for all of them is to the east, to North Vietnam. In fact, the whole economic trouble with Laos is the question of land communications. There is no railway. Laos, from the point of view of land communications, is not an actual unit, and the danger is that it may split into its component units if it is not developed. Luang-Prabang is cut off from the mountainous north; its only outlet is over the hills to Xieng Khouang and then to Vientiane. There is a very bad road to Vientiane, passable by jeep, but not by ordinary commercial traffic. Vientiane's natural outlet is Bangkok, 500 miles away and across a foreign territory. Savannakhet's natural outlet is to the east, to North Vietnam; also to Bangkok, but that is over 600 miles. Alone in Laos, Pakse, in the south, near the Cambodian border, has an easy road to Saigon, but that means crossing two foreign States, Cambodia and South Vietnam.

The rivers are not navigable, except the Mekong, and that only for short distances. In the dry season eight transshipments are needed between Luang-Prabang and Phnom Penh. Rapids, sandbanks and whirlpools all

add to the hazards, and unless enormous sums are spent it is not likely to become navigable. There is also the difficulty that Siam, Laos, Cambodia and South Vietnam are apparently incapable of agreement, and a great deal of money is going to be needed.

Air communications are largely the responsibility of the French, and that possibly is the best hope, but a great deal of foreign aid is needed if Laos is not to disintegrate into its old component parts. Even in 1957, Souphannouvong said: "We need foreign aid, not for years, but for decades, and from whatever source. We will go on taking American aid." This did not, apparently, please the Americans.

The last problem is the politico-military one. I am not going to attempt to offer a solution. The Pathet Lao are, as I said, a serious menace to the security of the country, thanks to the cadre sent by the Viet-minh. They are now excellent at guerilla warfare. The Royal Army and their instructors have not apparently learned the lessons of the Indo-Chinese war. They have trained their men to fight the ordinary, standard battle, not as guerillas; they are not trained to meet the one really serious enemy they are likely to meet.

The Laos have a problem, no matter who is in charge of the Government: are they going to try to cope alone? In that case they are going to have a long civil war. Should they call in the Americans? If they do, will the Americans go after the job is done, or will they stay? If they do call in the Americans, what will be the reaction of China and North Vietnam?

The real fear of Laos is neither the United States nor Russia, but their near neighbours, Siam and North Vietnam, and, over all, the menace of China, which overshadows everything throughout South-East Asia. That may be why both sides made such an effort to bring in the Americans and the Russians, because they hoped that America might be able to restrain the Siamese, and that Russia might be able to restrain the Chinese and North Vietnamese. As far as the Russians are concerned, the hope is faint.

But certainly Phoumi is no Siamese puppet. He would not last a day if he were. He has said that his one idea for Laos is a neutral Laos, free of all foreign interference and of all military alliances, and I think this desire is common to nearly all Laos, except those who are disciplined members of the Communist Party.

REPORT OF DISCUSSION

In response to a member's request, the lecturer then gave a lively account of some of his personal experiences in Laos. Asked if he thought Souvanna Phouma was a dupe of the Communists, he replied that in his opinion Souvanna Phouma, who was a highly intelligent man, was nevertheless completely powerless and that it was Kong Lae and Souphannouvong who were controlling the policy of the Army at the time in question.

The CHAIRMAN: I am afraid, My Lords, Ladies and Gentlemen, I must call this to a halt now. It is extremely interesting and could go on if only we had time. I would like, on your behalf, to thank Mr. Kemp for a most stimulating and interesting lecture.

