Hmong in Laos: Urbanization and Adaptation

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ABSTRACT

The following paper takes a look at post-Vietnam War urbanization and assimilation of the Hmong in Laos into Lao culture and society. The authors contest that the Hmong in Laos are undergoing rapid urbanization, aided by the aggressive relocation policies of the Lao government. Forced contact with the Lao has obliged the Hmong to adapt aspects of Lao culture, resulting in social and cultural upheavals.

Key words: Hmong, Laos, assimilation, adaptation, urbanization

INTRODUCTION

The Land of a Million Elephants

Laos is often referred to as the land of a million elephants. A more accurate description would probably be, in the words of one of its former prime ministers, a landlocked island among more powerful neighbors. China borders it to the north, Thailand to the west, Cambodia to the south, and Vietnam to the east. Laos is classified as a Least Developed Country (LCD). According to the Australian Government Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade web page, in 2002, its per capita income was estimated at US$310. The agricultural sector employs about 80% of the population. Little industrial development is done outside of the capital city Vientiane itself.

Laos relies heavily on foreign aid for interior development projects, such as road construction and the eradication of opium cultivation. Asia Times estimates that in 1999, for example, Laos received an estimated US$325 million in foreign aid of which 75% was used for public investment. Many of the development projects necessitate the relocation of mountain minorities. The Hmong are a key target.

The Hmong are categorized by anthropologists as an indigenous people. Indigenous peoples account for over 300 million of the world’s population; over half are found in Asia. Laos itself has 49 different ethnic tribes according to the symposium on tribes in Laos in 2000. The dominant ethnic group, the Lao, account for 43% of the population. All the other ethnic groups account for 57% of the population, rendering the ruling class a minority.

Government policy toward the Hmong and all the minority ethnic groups is strictly assimilationist. The Lao government routinely denies the existence of ethnic groups. In official government discourse, all ethnic minorities are Lao. Much like the ubiquitous term “American,” the term “Lao” is used as a general identity to bind people to the existent ethnic hierarchy and power structure. Ethnic groups are divided into three different categorizations of Lao: “Lao Soune” or Lao of the mountain tops, referring primarily to the Hmong; “Lao Toune” or Lao of the hillsides; and “Lao Loune” or Lao of the valleys.

The effacement of their ethnicity in favor of these terms, Lao Soune, Lao Toune, and Lao Loune, are meant to instill in every “Lao” a sense of nationalism and belonging to a state larger than the limits of their ethnic identity. In reality, the categorizations reinforce the racial and cultural hierarchies that pervade relations among Laos’ ethnic groups: the degree to which one is “civilized” works in opposition to the level of elevation of one’s origins. Therefore, the Hmong are seen as perhaps the most culturally distinct and backwards, inciting appellations like “lazy,” “savage,” and “dirty.” In a conversation with a Lao artist from Luangprabang, who had painted a picture of a bare breasted Hmong woman feeding her baby while leaning over lighting a fire, the artist stated that he felt bad for Hmong women. He went on to say that the Hmong men are lazy, marry many wives, treat them badly, smoke opium, and are savages. The director of the Lao Teacher’s College in Luangprabang echoes this view, justifying the lack of Hmong students at the school with the preconceived notion that, in his words, paraphrased, the Hmong do not like to be educated but prefer to live in the forests and not be bothered. This illusion of racial and cultural inferiority also promotes a strong sense of paternalism by the Lao over the Hmong.

The Lao government maintains that all groups have equal rights and are all equally “Lao.” The reality is that the ethnic Lao people control the national institutions, almost unanimously pervade government and financial realms, and have monopolizing access to institutions of higher learning.
The Hmong in the Modern Lao State

The Hmong first migrated into Laos in the mid 19th century where they led relatively secluded lives high in the mountains until the French, in actions recalling the Chinese oppression these montagnards had tried to escape, forced taxes upon them that incited them to rebel. From this time on, the Hmong have been more or less a part of the Laotian political scene, most often as a threat to the existing political order. This has especially been the case since the end of the Vietnam War. The fact that Hmong Chao Fa, remnant Lao government resistance fighters who are a living legacy of the Vietnam War and the United States abandonment of the Hmong, exist still in the forests of Laos 30 years after the end of the war, continuing it, in a sense, by random attacks upon the Lao population and, by extension, the government, attests to this. The government, in retaliation, has set out to destroy it while maintaining an appearance of international decorum.

The government effort to squash all opposition has taken diverse forms: mass killings, reeducation camps, imprisonment in inhumane conditions, and forced relocation into areas where the Lao government can keep a watchful eye. This last example has worked more or less effectively to “tame” the Hmong. Many have come down out of the mountains and into urban areas or into the lowlands to farm. This migration witnesses gradual but sure change in all aspects of Hmong culture and society, from additions of a Laotian salavong to the traditional Hmong wedding to the adoption of Lao or western style clothing. The following paper looks at the changes that have taken place as a result of this migration, forced or unforced, into the lowlands and into urban areas, and the inevitable negative consequences to Hmong culture and society.

Limitations to this research

The authors met two foreign government personnel living in Laos who were willing to talk about general politics in Laos but who explicitly requested not to be taped and their names mentioned. The requests make it impossible to document some of what will be said in the following pages. Also, because this type of research has never before been done to the knowledge of the authors, it was hard to find sources upon which to consult for further readings. As a result, much of what will be said will not come from documented sources but rather conclusions made from observations by the authors. The exception is the formal audio taped interviews.

The fact that the authors are young and two of them are female necessarily made it more difficult to approach Hmong people who are patriarchal and naturally reserved. In talking about changes in funerary rites, for example, they could not expect their subjects to open up as two of them were female and all of them were strangers.

METHOD

The authors took on this project in a 5-week stay in Laos in which they interviewed and otherwise observed the Hmong in urban and rural settings. Interviews were done both formally and informally, that is, they were taped when the participants were willing or took the form of a normal conversation when they were not. Questions asked followed a general guideline. Formal interviews were done with Hmong males and females, all over the age of 18. Informal interviews were done with two foreign government personnel working in Laos, as mentioned previously, a Laotian artist in Luangprabang, the director of the Lao Teacher’s College in Luangprabang, a Naiban of one of Vientiane’s district, and a Laotian government official in Phonsavanh.

The trip started in Vientiane, the capital of Laos. A substantial number of Hmong live in and especially around the capital. Worth noting are the two Hmong towns, Av Liab, located just outside of Vientiane, and Area 52, so named because it is exactly 52 kilometers from Vientiane. The authors also spent time in Phou Khoun, a Hmong mountain village; visited Luangprabang, the old capital of Vientiane, which, like Vientiane, has a substantial Hmong population; visited Muang Sing where many Hmong have been relocated to; and visited Phonsavanh, the city with the single largest Hmong population in Laos. Interviews were conducted in all afore mentioned places. The exception is Area 52.

RESULTS

The Hmong in Laos are undergoing rapid urbanization. In many cases, urbanization is forced by the aggressive relocation policies the Lao government has adopted. This complete and very abrupt immersion into Lao culture and society has obliged the Hmong to adopt aspects of Lao culture, observable in the evolution of clothing worn on a day-to-day basis, the adaptation of elaborate celebrations to the traditional wedding, and the urban phenomenon of beggars and homeless individuals.
Clothing

Clothing is one of the strongest and most obvious indicators of adaptation. An overwhelming number of young and middle-aged Hmong dress in Lao or western clothing while a clear majority of the old people—“old” defined as 50 years of age or older—wore traditional Hmong. When those who did not wear Hmong were asked why they did not wear Hmong, answers usually took these forms:

1) In the highlands, the traditional garments were suitable because they were warm. Now, the garments are an inconvenience because, heavy and bulky, they are unsuited to the warmer climate of the lowlands.

2) It is easier to quickly put on western style garments—zipped pants and a tee-shirt—or, for women, Laotian style ones—a simple skirt and a pullover blouse—than the complicated Hmong assemble of a wraparound skirt or one-size-fits-many pair of pants that needs a sash to hold it up, sashes, a shirt, and, if one were female and Green Hmong, leggings.

3) It is embarrassing and shameful to wear Hmong when one is living with Lao people now.

All three responses were given by the old. The younger generations, by contrast, almost always gave the third response: shame and embarrassment. This newfound sense of shame is indicative of strong societal pressures to conform—to assimilate—by adapting what is considered “normal” clothing in Lao society. Interviewees and people with whom the authors spoke on the evolution of clothing talked of the stares they received if they came into town dressed in Hmong.

The newfound embarrassment in Hmong traditional garb underlies a split personality of shame and pride, for even as the Hmong attempt to conform by adopting Lao or western clothing, they adopt styles of dress and accessories that distinguish them clearly from the Lao and other ethnic groups. A great example is the earrings. A Hmong woman at market can usually be distinguished from her Lao or other ethnic minority counterpart by the distinct silver or gold earrings she wears. Another example found more among the older generations is the colorful head wraps. And a Hmong can always be distinguished by the basket, or kawm, carried on the back.

While the Hmong in urban areas wear Lao clothing, they effectively distinguish themselves from the Lao by striking distinctions made in their Lao-style clothing. Most Hmong women, for example, wear their Lao skirt wrapped differently than the Lao. The Hmong, while incorporating Lao/Thai dress to avoid appearing different, do so with the idea that they are different, and want to identify themselves as such by subtle differences that do not draw as much attention.

The Wedding

In addition to clothing, some traditional cultural practices have changed in accordance with urban life. The authors had a chance to attend an urban phenomenon: a post-wedding dance called the salavong by the Hmong. At the salavong, Hmong clothing required for the wedding is abandoned and Lao clothing put on. All the young and unmarried gather. There is loud music and everyone dances. It is a time for courtship, socializing, and fun. This modern addition to a traditional Hmong wedding is not an adoption of a Lao wedding. Rather, it is an urban manifestation that has taken form because the Hmong in urban towns have the financial means, and because urban life allows for social gatherings such as this that life in the highlands, where the daily drudgery of the fields takes up all the attention, would not allow.

Several young Hmong men also related that the bride price is increasingly not being extracted from the groom. This may apply only to Phonsavanh or to certain families who desire it so. What is interesting is that these young men voiced very western thoughts, saying that extraction of a bride price renders the woman little more than a piece of merchandise. While origins of the bride price can only be guessed at, traditional Hmong culture does not view the bride price as such. Explanations come in diverse forms: 1) the money is in appreciation of the bride’s mother for all she has done in birthing and raising the daughter 2) the money—nonrefundable—insures the bride’s parents that the bride will not be mistreated and divorced on a whim 3) it’s the way it’s always been and so on. The young men’s comments hint at a bastardization of traditions by outside values.

The Urban Sphere

One of the foreign government personnel confirmed the assimilationist goals of Laos by relating Lao policies toward ethnic groups. He related that Laos is intent on assimilating the Hmong by relocating them out of the mountains, and openly admits that a benefit to Hmong removal and relocation is the assimilation of Hmong people. The Hmong are given land and taught to grow new crops such as cabbages by way of introduction into the Laos
market economy. The funding for relocation is provided by the United States. The money is to aid Laos in fighting the "drug war," that is, to effectively stop opium cultivation, of which the Hmong are the biggest exploiters.

According to the source, while the US is largely helping Laos' effort to industrialize by assimilating minority peoples like the Hmong, Laos' real impetus to assimilate the Hmong, other than the fear of political mobilization, is the development of the natural resources in Hmong held lands. Laos seeks to remove the Hmong from the mountains in an effort to gain access to their resources for development by Japanese corporations. He says that Japan gives more aid to Laos than any other country and, in return, has almost exclusive rights to exploitation of natural resources such as trees and rich deposits of minerals. Relocation and assimilation of the Hmong, in effect, offers a double benefit for Laos.

In relocated villages there are schools where Hmong children are mandated to go and learn Lao and Lao history, and there are party officials to oversee the village. The government is able to break up the tight knit Hmong communities living in isolated independence from government control to accessible areas where they can be watched and largely controlled. Potential political agitation is easily stifled by fear of punishment and reprisal. As Amnesty spokesman Daniel Alberman says, "Prison conditions in Laos are awful, and the Hmong are particularly badly treated."14

As Hmong society is restructured, the culture and values change from a subsistence society based on the village as a living community depending on the land for survival and maintenance of identity to one dependent on money and manufactured goods. The Hmong have been able to retain their identity through preservation of their culture only because of their independent resourcefulness. Urbanization witnesses a gradual disconnect with the land and dependence on commercial goods. Due to the small population of Laos in many urban areas most Hmong people still continue to work fields outside the city limits, but in cities like Vientiane and Luang Prabang, Hmong people have not only supplemented their lives with commercial goods but have become dependent on them.

In urban areas like Vientiane, Av Liab, and Luangprabang, as well as Wat Tham krabok (the camp in Thailand where Hmong who were not repatriated to Laos in the early 1990’s live), issues of gender role surface. Without the traditional subsistence farming lifestyle, all are left idle. Women find work in sewing and selling paj ntaub. Some men have follow suit, an embarassment in traditional Hmong society, but a necessity for survival now. This "feminization" of the men is joked about, accompanied by smirks.

Vientiane and Av Liab: Examples of the Urban Phenomenon

Av Liab is an example of a relocated Hmong "village.” Its appellation of “village” veils a function reminiscent of the refugee camps of Thailand, where Hmong from all over Laos are thrown together and traditional clan structures of leadership are stripped of power. Av Liab is a testimonial of the many transforming factors over Hmong culture. The inhabitants are concerned, not with a subsistence production economy, but instead, advocate urbanization and development for the growth of a money economy. Most of the women sew paj ntaub to sell in Vientiane.

There is a general breakdown of the importance of the community in relocated villages like Av Liab. This breakdown inevitably results in high incidence of forms of crime and escapism not widely seen in traditional community settings: factional Hmong parties fight with each other and violence occurs at a higher rate because of emotional depression and economic hardship, aggravated by close quarters. According to the government personnel, there is also a much higher rate of opium usage in the relocated villages as people seek to emotionally and mentally escape the depression of daily life.

Many Hmong people are without family structure and traditional guidance. Working for money in other than subsistence economies changes a culture so long based on agriculture and leaves little time for cultural regeneration. The machine of industrialization must constantly be fed with the sacrifices of human lives, and so the diverse lifestyle of the Hmong is lost, effacing cultural survival and the unique Hmong world view.

In Vientiane, most Hmong are scraping out a living selling what they can. A minority have well paying jobs while many others are homeless or begging on the streets. The first person interviewed in Laos was a homeless woman in the marketplace. She wanted some money to buy milk for her baby. Traditionally, Hmong people do not use animal milk to feed their babies. The conclusion is that she was either so malnourished she couldn’t produce any or she wanted the money for other reasons. At any rate, providing milk for a baby in a traditional community would not have been a problem with family and clan members to help. She is an example of the urbanized individual dependent on manufactured goods and the money necessary to obtain them.

This was particularly disturbing because having to beg in Hmong culture is considered extremely dire and disgraceful, as it means that one does not have family or clan. Like many other indigenous societies, Hmong cultural identity is structured on one’s community, which clan one belongs to, and what family. To be without these is to lack fundamental components of what makes a person Hmong.
Phou Khoun: A Traditional Hmong Village

In more traditional villages like Phou Khoun, a functioning community in the traditional sense exists. Every minute part of the community played an integral and reciprocal role in the collective responsibility and survival of the whole. Families work the fields, elders make goods for the community, younger children play while older ones watch them. Everyone has a role to fulfill in the community. This was most evident with the non-human members of community. Dogs, for example, wandered through the village cleaned up scraps and warned the people of intruders. In return, they were fed. While fields existed far from the actual village, forest and brush surround the village to provide a filter for waste. They also serve as a form of privacy for the community. Each member is dependent on the success of the others and great care is taken to see that health and balance was maintained.

Urbanization for the Hmong doesn’t necessarily mean complete assimilation, and many people retain a strong identity. Perhaps the most interesting story was of the Hmong women in Luangprabang who, after being pushed from a market by the government where they sold paj ntaub to tourists, organized, protested and regained the right to sell almost exclusively at that market. Of course the sale of paj ntaub to tourists is a recent phenomenon that is not traditional. However, these women’s ability to organize in such an urbanized setting shows a broadening of a Hmong network of communication, a traditional value applied in an urban setting. Indeed this growing network includes Hmong people from all over the world and there are a few people who travel between the US and Laos to sell goods.

Whatever the success of the some Hmong in urban settings, the cultural loss and loss of identity has been overwhelming. Some of the Hmong have a modicum of success, but at the sacrifice of their Hmong identity. To succeed, one must be as Lao as possible. Several people, who are successful by Lao standards, did not speak Hmong very well. All were not very familiar with Hmong traditions. A striking example is a teacher form Vientiane who was interviewed. Her experience with the Lao contrast her with those of the Hmong women selling medicine in the market or the inhabitants of Av Liab. While the latter two talked about the prejudices they face in Lao society, she says that there she has experienced none. She maintains that there exists equal opportunity in Laos.

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