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CONFLICT IN LAOS: THE VILLAGE POINT OF VIEW

THOMAS H. STANTON*

In the summer of 1966 the Royal Lao Government (RLG) faced a parliamentary crisis. Strong regional factions in the National Assembly demanded that Prime Minister Souvanna Phouma redistribute the cabinet seats left vacant by the withdrawal from the government of the Neo Lao Hak Xat (NLHX, or Pathet Lao political front) deputies. After much maneuvering, the Prime Minister managed to retain these seats for the NLHX, should it return to the formally neutralist government.¹

Although this delicate situation received close attention from the Western press, it had no meaning whatsoever for the average Lao villager, who probably does not recognize the name of the National Assembly in which he is represented.² It will be the purpose of this paper to direct the attention of the reader away from the well publicized affairs of the small Lao urban elite to the crucial arena of Lao domestic politics today—the village. Once we have examined the nature of elite politics from the perspective of the villager, we shall be able to draw conclusions that are very relevant not only to the struggle between the RLG and Pathet Lao (PL) in Laos, but also to the analogous conflicts currently taking place in Northeast Thailand and Vietnam.

LINKS BETWEEN THE VILLAGER AND THE URBAN ELITE

The anthropologist Robert Redfield has created a model of peasant culture which, with minor modification, appears to be highly relevant to Lao society today. Briefly, he posits a society divided into two parts:

. . . local life and the life of the feudal system or the state; and in peasant societies the two parts are clearly distinguishable. At the bottom

*The author wishes to thank the Agency for International Development (AID) for providing him with the opportunity to conduct his research in Laos while participating in an AID summer intern program. He is also most gratified for the thought and enthusiasm contributed and evoked by Professors Harry J. Benda and Robert O. Tilman.

¹See *The Economist*, August 6-12, 1966, p. 536.

²Although 689,598 persons are said to have voted in the 1958 supplementary election, thus implying at least some village knowledge of the National Assembly, it is probable that most villagers voted because their headman asked them to place their ballot cards in a box rather than because they understood the difference between candidates or the nature of the offices to be filled. See John E. deYoung, *Village Life in Modern Thailand* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1963), pp. 150-51, for a description of the conducting of an election in the culturally similar Thai Northeast. Unfortunately, I could find no comparable reports on Lao elections. For the election statistics cited, see J. M. Halpern, *Government, Politics, and Social Structure in Laos* (New Haven: Yale University Southeast Asia Studies, 1964), p. 31 and Table 2, p. 186.

the series of units consists of people in personal and traditional relationship to one another; there kinship and neighborhood are the prevailing connections. At the top of the series are people in more impersonal and formal institutional relationship to one another. As a system of hierarchically arranged social relations, a peasant society is two connecting halves.

. . . [T]here are two kinds of people, peasants and a more urban . . . elite. *The two kinds of people look at each other, at that joint or hinge in the total society, and have for each other attitudes that complement (but not always compliment) each other. The relationships between the two kinds of people define the relative status of one to the other. [The intellectual and often the religious and moral life of the village is perpetually incomplete and the] lower kind of people recognize, in certain respects, the political authority of the other and also their 'guidance in the moral sphere.'* (Italics added.)³

It is clear that while the urban elite may fill the peasant need for intellectual and moral guidance, those who translate the elite concepts into terms comprehensible by the illiterate villager are crucial to the communications process. In Redfield's terms, between the elite "Great Tradition" and the village "Little Tradition" there exists a "joint" or "link" composed of men familiar with both halves of the society.

The members of this link are not only local government leaders (especially the village headmen), but also such key men as the local medic, parish priest, school teacher, and, in some areas, the local military commander. These men derive their influence from the contacts which they have with the world outside the village and possess authority considerably beyond that implied by their formal duties alone. Their high status derives not only from their positions as representatives of powerful institutions, but also from the fact that they are educated and serve as channels of communication through which the villager is related with the great tradition.⁴

The difficulties facing the members of the link in translating concepts from the great tradition (be they political, religious, technical, etc.) into terms understood by the peasant are considerable.⁵ Thus, to give some examples from the Lao context: (a) A doctor will explain that diseases are caused by germs and will be understood to have been talking about the little tradition spirits, the *phi*; (b) A missionary with long experience will be willing to

³Robert Redfield, *Peasant Society and Culture* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1956), pp. 27, 36, 41, *passim*. Our modifications, including calling the members of the hinge "links" or "opinion leaders" (the terms will be used interchangeably), are discussed in note 41 below.

⁴*Ibid.*, p. 37. The status of such men is also high in Western society. We shall discuss this point further below. See Elihu Katz and Paul F. Lazarsfeld, *Personal Influence: the Part Played by People in the Flow of Mass Communications* (New York: The Free Press of Glencoe, 1955), and Katz, "The Two-Step Flow of Communication: an Up-to-Date Report," in the *Public Opinion Quarterly*, Vol. XXI (Spring 1957), pp. 61-78.

⁵I use the term "peasant," as does Redfield, to indicate a member of the little tradition. I shall use the terms "peasant" and "villager" interchangeably in this paper.

call his adherents Christian if they, upon death, are buried in the traditional manner—with the minor change that a wood cross replace the usual flag to the *phi* above the burial hut. (Another missionary working in the same area, but who demanded knowledge of the Bible and of certain religious ceremonies, found that he made four converts in as many years, and these probably only as a result of his personal relationship with them); (c) An American AID official will find it difficult to communicate to villagers that the miraculously performing water pump he has installed requires regular lubrication (since, even with nonlubrication, the pump will continue to function for a few months); (d) A Pathet Lao cadre will explain to a villager that an “imperialist” is a kind of big guy who comes into a person’s house and takes his things.⁶

The little tradition appears to only selectively accept concepts from the great tradition. In addition, teachings will frequently be understood by peasants in ways not intended by the teacher.⁷ (An amazing, if non-Lao, example of this phenomenon is provided by the Cao-Dai sect of Vietnam, which has incorporated the figures of Confucius, Jesus, the Buddha, Lao-tzu, Brahma, Sun Yat-sen and Victor Hugo into its folk religion.⁸) With the Redfield model of peasant society in mind, we shall now turn our attention to the Royal Kingdom of Laos, first examining the country as a whole and then focusing on one specific village.

AN OVERVIEW OF COMMUNICATIONS IN THE COUNTRY AS A WHOLE

Laos has not yet had a complete census, even in the areas under RLG control. The population appears to be between 2 and 2½ million, giving Laos one of the lowest population densities in Southeast Asia. Only some 5% of the people live in urban areas, and over half of these (about 80,000) live in Vientiane, the administrative capital of the country.⁹ Although precise statistics are lacking, the ethnic Lao appear to make up slightly less than half of the population, the major remaining groups being the T’ai, Meo, mountain people (Lao Theung or, as they are popularly called, Kha) and the foreign minorities including Chinese, Vietnamese, Europeans and Americans.

Communications in Laos are hampered by the absence of a common language, the Lao tongue being comprehensible only to the T’ai and the ethnic Lao. The level of literacy is low, and probably only 15 to 20% of the

⁶All these examples were either observed by me or related to me during my visit to Laos in the summer of 1966.

⁷Redfield, *op. cit.*, p. 42.

⁸Department of the Army, *Area Handbook for Vietnam* (1962), p. 134. Certain great tradition themes seem to be more easily absorbed into a particular little tradition than others. For example, Emmanuel Sarkisyanz, *Russland und der Messianismus des Orients* (Tübingen, 1955), p. 8 and *passim*, has studied the acceptance of Marxist doctrines by Russian villagers. It is his contention that Marxist ideology found its counterparts among village beliefs, thus inducing its rapid integration into the little tradition.

⁹Human Relations Area Files, F. M. LeBar and A. Suddard (eds.), *Laos: Its People, Its Society, Its Culture* (New Haven: HRAF, 1960), p. 30 and Table 2, p. 238. Also, H. E. Haight, “Lao Provincial Leaders and Population Statistics” (USAID Mimeo, Vientiane, May 1965), p. 1.

population can read one language.¹⁰ Of the mass media, newspapers serve almost solely the urban areas; films, although also urban centered, are sometimes made available to villagers by mobile units. Only radio can be said to serve a large number of villages.

However, the general ineffectiveness of these media is more than merely a result of their unavailability. It arises far more from the inability of the peasant to comprehend many concepts as they are presented by these channels of mass communication. My personal experience in Laos and the experiences of USIS officials in both Laos and the culturally similar Thai Northeast indicate that radio broadcasts and even films must be personally interpreted to village audiences if they are to be taken as more than another form of entertainment.¹¹ It is clear that in this society, face-to-face communication is crucial for the transmission of information from the urban to the rural areas (in our terms, from the great to the little tradition).

THE VILLAGERS' LINKS TO THE RLG AND THE PL

Let us now examine the impact of the great tradition on one single village, Houei Kong, located on the Bolovens Plateau in Southern Laos. Although the inhabitants of the Bolovens are not ethnic Lao, but rather are members of two Lao Theung tribes, the situation is not very different, at least in the terms of this analysis, from that in an ethnic Lao village.

The Bolovens Plateau is roughly fifty miles in diameter. A general picture of the security situation would place a north-south strip of land, approximately twenty miles wide and running through the middle of the plateau, under Pathet Lao administration, with the western and eastern portions under RLG control. Houei Kong is situated in the eastern part, a few miles from the PL area. The indigenous population is composed of two tribes—the Neahun, who live mostly on the eastern (RLG) one-third of the plateau, and the Loven, who are mostly in the central (PL) and western (RLG) areas. As a result of historical circumstances to be discussed below, over half of the Loven live in the territory administered by the Pathet Lao. In the Houei Kong area, Loven and Neahun villages are fairly well interspersed with one another, and the *Nai Kong* (RLG tribal leaders roughly corresponding to the lowland *Chao Muong*, or district officers) of both tribes reside in Houei Kong itself.¹²

¹⁰This is the estimate given by an official of USIS (the U.S. Information Service), Vientiane, in the summer of 1966. See also Southeast Asia Development Advisory Group, "Background Paper: United States Aid to Laos" (AID Bureau for the Far East, Washington, January 1966), p. 1.

¹¹See J. M. Halpern, *op. cit.*, pp. 47-49. United States Operations Mission to Thailand, *Village Channels of Communication in Northeast Thailand, A Pilot Study: Highlights of the Study* (Bangkok: Asia Services Co., Ltd., December 1964), especially pp. 1 and 7-9, is very relevant to this point. See also Lee W. Huff, "Observations on Mobile Development Unit-2 Operations" (Joint Thai-U.S. Development and Test Center, Thailand, June 1963), p. 26.

¹²For a description of these two mountain peoples, see LeBar, *et al.*, *Ethnic Groups of Mainland Southeast Asia* (New Haven: HRAF, 1964), pp. 143-44.

Houei Kong is a Loven village of over 200 people and is thus close to the size of the average Lao village but somewhat larger than the average village on the plateau (which contains an estimated 25,000 people settled in some 250 villages—these figures being somewhat conjectural since statistics for the PL area are not available). The Loven and Neahun have been rather neglected by the Royal Lao Government, particularly with regard to education. Of some 44 villages on the eastern (AID-assisted) part of the plateau, only five have one-room schools and Houei Kong contains a recently completed, six-room *Groupe Scolaire*.¹³

A very large majority of the women in the RLG area speak only their native Loven or Neahun language. On the other hand, with the increase in conscription by the RLG,¹⁴ military service has led to considerable fluency in the Lao language among the younger men on the plateau. However, since the policy of recruitment of Loven and Neahun into the RLG armed forces began only in 1961—under the auspices of the U.S. special forces¹⁵—the overall fraction of the RLG plateau population that speaks Lao is still quite small.

A formal organization chart of the RLG as it relates to the village would show the King at the top, followed by the National Assembly and Cabinet, followed by something like four parallel columns of offices corresponding to the field structures of the military, the administrative bureaucracy, the technical bureaucracy, and USAID. AID has been active in Houei Kong only since September 1963, but from the late 1950s until 1962 JUSMAAG (Joint U.S. Military Assistance Advisory Group) and White Star (military “civic action”) teams were conducting sizable aid programs in the area because of its strategic importance.

It is evident that the Houei Kong villager is not aware of his own appearance on such a table of organization. This is shown, for example, in the results of a small survey I conducted of 28 young men who had been selected by their village headman to attend an AID-sponsored training program in Houei Kong. These trainees were *not* typical of the average villager since they were male and possessed at least a minimum literacy in Lao in order to qualify for the program. Most had been students at the local *Groupe Scolaire* and they had each completed an average of over three years of school.

The survey and its results, presented below, are rather limited because

¹³For information on this and other AID activities in the Houei Kong area, see F. C. Hubig, “Pakse Area CAP Submission, Houei Kong Cluster” (USAID Mimeo, Pakse, 1966), and “U.S. Aid Helps Secure Vital Laotian Plateau,” *The New York Times*, January 15, 1967, p. 6.

¹⁴The RLG today has an army of some 70,000 men (see *The Economist*, August 6-12, 1966, p. 536) out of a population of roughly two million, of whom over a fourth are in PL areas, thus reducing the relevant population to, say, a million and a half. Thus, almost 5% of the population is under arms, one of the highest proportions of any country in the world.

¹⁵Arthur J. Dommen, *Conflict in Laos: the Politics of Neutralization* (New York: Frederick A. Praeger, 1964), pp. 272-73.

the investigation was intended primarily to inform the AID staff of the backgrounds and aspirations of the trainees and their degree of satisfaction with the training program. I asked the sociopolitical questions only after the more detailed AID questions had been answered. Because of the simple nature of the survey, I shall present my findings in fairly general terms.

Less than half of the trainees were able to name their King.¹⁶ Two out of five could identify *Chao* Souvanna Phouma as their Prime Minister or at least as being in the government (and the prefix *Chao*, meaning "leader," was itself a clue to the answer). One-third identified *Chao* Soupannavong as leader of the Pathet Lao or at least as a royal prince. On the regional level, the RLG general of the Fourth Military Zone (Southern Laos) could be named by over 90% of the trainees. This is significant, especially when contrasted with the fact that less than three out of five could name the province in which they reside (Attopeu), in spite of the fact that the Provincial Governor had addressed them less than a month before in a ceremony opening the training program.¹⁷

Sithone, the Loven leader of the Pathet Lao (see below) was identified by over two out of five respondents—more than the number who could identify the Prime Minister. The segment identifying the Pathet Lao leaders should be considered low since it includes only those trainees who gave a positive answer and not those who laughed and hesitated to demonstrate knowledge of the PL, against whom the entire USAID effort is clearly directed. On the more local level, I found no one who could not name the two *Naikong* or their *Tasseng* or *Pho Ban* (respectively: tribal leader, canton chief and village headman).

A question, "who is the man who is important" (for the plateau), for which up to three answers were allowed, elicited a significant response in favor of the two *Naikong* and the local area military commander, a Neahun. Even the widely known general of the military zone did not receive significant mention. From the point of view of this paper it is interesting that one trainee from a small distant village named as the most important person a member of his village who had returned from an AID teacher training program in Attopeu city. Others receiving only one or two votes were the *Chao*

¹⁶This result may be misleading since, "in the hierarchical society of Laos peasants and often townspeople are more apt to be aware of a class of superior persons or of a position rather than the name of an individual. Had the questions been posed in terms of knowledge of authority or status it is possible that a quite different index of awareness would have resulted. In any case, it is true that most of the population see themselves as widely separated from the government." J. M. Halpern, *op. cit.*, p. 106, note 42. Halpern also cites figures from a similar survey of people in Vientiane, provincial capitals, and villages. His figures are much lower than mine—19% of villagers in 1959 knew the name of the late King. *Ibid.*, p. 43. My respondents, it must again be emphasized, were a select and relatively educated group, a fact which does not detract from the fairly moderate conclusions drawn from my survey.

¹⁷This phenomenon is clearly related to J. M. Halpern's comment cited in note 16. Most members of the village and all trainees had shown considerable deference to the *Chao Khoueng*, especially in a ceremony greeting him when he landed in a helicopter near the trainees' barracks.

Khoueng (provincial governor), *Tasseng* (canton chiefs), local military personages, and the King (Americans were explicitly excluded from this question).

From this brief survey, these significant points emerge: First, it is clear that there is a definite difference between a leader (the two *Naikong* and the local area military commander) and one to whom respect is paid as a man of authority (e.g. the general of the zone, the *Chao Khoueng*, the Prime Minister).¹⁸ It is only the former who are the link for the villagers; the latter are already part of the great tradition. Second, the respondents were almost as familiar with Soupannavong as they were with the Prime Minister, Souvanna Phouma, and were more aware of Sithone, the Loven PL leader, than they were of their own province governor. We may conclude that in Houei Kong today members of the Pathet Lao form part of the link for the villagers, even though they are in an area strongly controlled by the Royal Lao Government.¹⁹

If we now examine other links for the Houei Kong villager, those who stand out are members of the AID staff who speak Lao (none speak the Loven or Neahun language, this being against RLG policy) and RLG technical personnel, including school teachers, medics and agricultural experts. It is reasonable to believe that these people do have influence (especially when one notes the eagerness with which village youths volunteer for various training programs), but it is probably much lower in outlying villages than in Houei Kong, which is the center of governmental operations.²⁰

Increasingly important links with the RLG great tradition are the Loven and Neahun trainees who return to their villages from Houei Kong as well as from medical or other technical training programs elsewhere in Laos (for example, there are currently 14 villagers who have returned home after training in lowland USAID hospitals. They work in six AID-stocked dispensaries located in outlying villages and are, I can testify, much more valuable to the RLG as members of the link than they are to their villagers as a source of medical knowledge).

Other informal links include two missionaries (referred to already), a Catholic and a Protestant, who live near Houei Kong. There are no Buddhist activities in this area although a number of Buddhist converts have been made among the Loven on the western (RLG) part of the plateau,

¹⁸This finding is not an original one. See Toshio Yatsushiro, "A Study in Village Organization and Leadership in [Northeast] Thailand: A Summary" (USOM/Research Division, Mimeo, Bangkok, June 1966), pp. 2-9.

¹⁹It is quite possible that my respondents did not themselves receive information from a PL cadre, but rather that they learned of the PL great tradition through their extended family groups, which frequently overlap both RLG and PL parts of the plateau. This relates well to the idea that trading relations are also good across RLG-PL lines (see below). See *Village Channels* . . . , *op. cit.*, pp. 12-13, for a discussion of the high degree of communication between villages and within family groups in Northeast Thailand.

²⁰It may well be that the development activities of AID in Houei Kong are made known at least vaguely to other villages on the plateau by means of the same channels of communication bringing PL information to the RLG area.

which, in contrast to the eastern part, is easily accessible by road from the Buddhist lowlands.²¹ The Houei Kong Chinese merchant, who married a local girl and whose eldest daughter has also married into the village, is another informal link. He makes frequent trips (through the PL area, as we shall discuss below) to the town of Pakse for goods to sell around Houei Kong.

The anti-RLG links on the plateau—the Pathet Lao—should now be examined.²² Pathet Lao strength on the plateau today is directly related to a strong anti-French campaign waged by the Loven from 1910 to 1937. The present head of the Pathet Lao on the Bolovens is Sithone, the eldest son of the leader of the Loven rebellion, executed by the French in 1937.²³ While well over half of the Loven, occupying about a third of the plateau, today follow Sithone's leadership, most of the Neahun, on the eastern one-third of the plateau, do not accept his authority.

The organization of the villager under Pathet Lao government differs both formally and essentially from that of the villager under the RLG. Burchett, in his unfortunately polemic book, *Mekong Upstream*,²⁴ indicates that the Pathet Lao have rejected the traditional *Naikong*, *Tasseng*, and *Pho Ban* structure in favor of a system of village committees. His eye-witness observations substantiate, however, that, as one would expect, the PL have continued the traditional practice of levying taxes and corvee requirements on the local population, possibly in a modified form.²⁵ A table of Pathet Lao government organization is available in a study by Bernard Fall.²⁶ The committee system repeats itself at all echelons, with the committee members of higher levels being at the same time the leaders of lower level groups. For example, most of the committee members of the provincial (*Khoueng*) echelon are the *Nanhok Neo Muong* (presidents of district group committees), and so forth.

Through a presumably similar organization, the Loven in the area administered by the Pathet Lao are linked much more closely to their political elites than are the remaining inhabitants of the Bolovens to the RLG. In-

²¹LeBar, *Ethnic Groups . . .*, *op. cit.*, p. 143.

²²The two groups, RLG and PL, are by no means in a state of constant violent opposition, although there have been open military conflicts on the plateau. See A. M. Halpern and H. B. Fredman, "Communist Strategy in Laos" (RAND, RM-2561, June 14, 1960), pp. 113-14.

The Pathet Lao are known to the villagers as the *Issara*, or "Free." Pathet Lao ("Land of the Lao") refers to the territory administered by the *Lao Issara*. In this paper, however, we shall continue with the common Western usage of the term Pathet Lao to indicate the armed forces and government nominally under Soupannavong.

²³Wilfred Burchett, *Mekong Upstream* (London: Seven Seas Publishers, 1959), pp. 209-12. Also, Dommen, *op. cit.*, p. 74.

²⁴*Ibid.*, pp. 203, 205-206 and 260. See also Dommen, *op. cit.*, pp. 88-89, and LeBar and Suddard, *Laos . . .*, *op. cit.*, p. 128.

²⁵Burchett, *op. cit.*, pp. 260-61.

²⁶Bernard Fall, "The Pathet Lao, a 'Liberation' Party," in Robert A. Scalapino (ed.), *The Communist Revolution in Asia* (Englewood Cliffs, New Jersey: Prentice-Hall, Inc., 1965), p. 182. See also Dommen, *op. cit.*, p. 88.

dividual villagers are encouraged, not always peacefully, to participate in group affairs through associations for women, youth, farmers, etc. In addition, study groups composed of a number of families meet regularly with a cadre to discuss village problems and receive political and other education.²⁷

Sithone is a vice-chairman of the NLHX Central Committee, a group containing a number of non-ethnic Lao.²⁸ By contrast, the RLG National Assembly, which might be considered the formal counterpart of the NLHX Central Committee, contains few non-ethnic Lao. (Indeed, we must note that Pathet Lao strength is found primarily, although not exclusively, among the *Lao Theung*. This situation may have arisen not only because of the appeal of the PL emphasis on equality for this much discriminated-against group, but also because of a PL desire to operate from bases near the Vietnamese border).²⁹

In addition to the committee structure, there are a number of other links between the PL Loven and their great tradition. As noted above, the military link of the RLG with the Loven was created only in 1961, much later than in the PL area where organized recruitment had been in progress for many years.³⁰ And since AID and RLG staff have never been active in the PL area, we may assume that medics and agricultural experts there are oriented towards the Pathet Lao great tradition.³¹

Returnees to the plateau from PL armed units and training programs³² are probably more significant to villagers than are their RLG counterparts. Pathet Lao emphasis on learning and regular attendance at study group and association meetings presumably provides the villager with frequent access to the knowledge the returnee has gained.³³ Non-compliance by villagers is made unattractive because of the great chance that it will be detected and punished. Fall reports that the entire Pathet Lao administrative system is under the constant observation of secret roving inspectors who report to the Central Committee on the performance of officials.³⁴

It would not be surprising if the mercantile links between the Loven in both parts of the plateau and the Lao urban centers were frequently overlapping. It is known, for example, that the Houei Kong Chinese merchant, who transports his goods from the lowlands to Houei Kong through the Pathet Lao area, regularly pays tolls for the privilege. Also, when I flew over the PL

²⁷Dommen, *op. cit.*, pp. 87-89; J. M. Halpern, *op. cit.*, p. 15; and Fall, *op. cit.*, p. 182.

²⁸This position possibly (see Burchett, *op. cit.*, p. 213) gives Sithone authority over non-Loven *Lao Theung* as well, thus making him a near functional equivalent of the RLG commander of the Fourth Military Zone. On the latter point, see Dommen, *op. cit.*, p. 92.

²⁹Fall, *op. cit.*, p. 173. In regard to the first point, it is interesting to note that one of my interviewees, when asked to explain the difference between the Lao and the Neahun, replied, "The Lao have a King."

³⁰Dommen, *op. cit.*, p. 272.

³¹See Burchett, *op. cit.*, pp. 262-63, and Fall, *op. cit.*, p. 184.

³²Fall, *op. cit.*, p. 183.

³³Dommen, *op. cit.*, pp. 87-89. J. M. Halpern, *op. cit.*, p. 15.

³⁴Fall, *op. cit.*, p. 182.

area I noticed that the density of metal roofing in the PL villages was about the same as in the RLG part of the plateau. Since this roofing is obtainable either from Pakse (via the Chinese merchant?) or from the U.S. development project itself (traditionally, roofs are made of matting), it is clear that good trading relations exist either directly between the two parts of the plateau or between them and the importer in Pakse.

More seriously, there exists the possibility that a given village figure is serving both the RLG and the PL. According to Fall, "Very often, the NLHX village administrative official . . . is at the same time the official village head for the Royal Laotian Government."³⁵ On the whole, it is safe to say that the RLG is currently being, to use Fall's apt phrase, "out-administered" by the PL:

As of 1965, there existed at least eleven full-fledged PL provincial administrations (out of a total of sixteen Laotian provinces), and these successfully overshadowed the legal but ineffective RLG administration. There even exists an openly known governor of the province of Vientiane. . . .³⁶

There are, of course, few opportunities for us to examine the interpretation by PL cadres (members of the link) of the great tradition in terms of the villagers' little tradition.³⁷ One source of Pathet Lao communication is, however, readily available to Western observers—the radio. If we acknowledge that even direct radio appeals and "news" are comprehensible to the average villager only through face-to-face mediation by a member of the link (as discussed above), and when we exclude Radio Pathet Lao broadcasts intended for rebroadcast by other radio services (especially Hanoi and Peking), we find that there still remain many programs which, although they use Marxist-Leninist terms, do not use concepts requiring a Marxist-Leninist ideological background on the part of the listener.³⁸ A good example of this phenomenon is the following excerpt from a Radio Pathet Lao broadcast:

. . . In carrying out these bloody murderous acts Washington has unmasked its savage animal face and has shown to the world that it is a bloodthirsty imperialist aggressor who is the most savage, cruel and inhuman bandit and war criminal. These murderous acts prove that the Washington Administration is a most inhuman bandit and is completely without any human feeling. . . .³⁹

One need not have read Lenin to understand from this passage that an "imperialist" is not the nicest of people! But at the same time we should realize

³⁵*Ibid.*

³⁶*Ibid.*, p. 183. RLG control in the province of Attopeu, for example, is limited to the eastern Bolovens Plateau area, containing Houei Kong, and the provincial capital of Attopeu alone. The Pathet Lao, probably with Vietnamese support, administer the remaining major portion of the province and population.

³⁷For a discussion of this, in general terms, see Dommen, *op. cit.*, pp. 88, 270-71.

³⁸See citations by J. M. Halpern, *op. cit.*, pp. 16-17.

³⁹Foreign Broadcast Information Service, *Daily Report*, July 30, 1966.

from the use of terms such as "Washington," "Administration," and "war criminal," that this passage will still require interpretation for the villager.⁴⁰

COMPETITION FOR THE VILLAGERS' ALLEGIANCE

In examining a very specific topic—the nature of communications between the great tradition and the little tradition in Laos—we have focused our attention on the links between the inhabitants of the Bolovens Plateau and the two great traditions of the RLG and PL elites.⁴¹ We have *not* discussed other phenomena relevant to the contest of power between these elites, including:

(a) The nature of village-level communications (e.g., we have ignored the kinship structure, which frequently overlaps the boundary between RLG and PL areas);

(b) The *content* of appeals directed at villagers by the two elites, including attempts to discredit each other;

(c) The amount of coercion applied by the two administrations in situations where voluntary compliance on the part of villagers is not forthcoming; and

(d) Any dynamic aspects of the contest, including an analysis of the permanent changes made in the traditional communications system because of educational or community development efforts of the two governments.

However, recognizing that this paper has not dealt with these important aspects of the subject, we still are justified in drawing several tentative and modest conclusions.

We shall begin by noting the differences between the situation we have been describing, based on the Redfield model, and the social structure as it is, for example, in the United States. The Katz and Lazarsfeld "Two-Step Flow of Communication" hypothesis notes that in the U.S. a person more familiar with mass media communications relevant to a specific topic will interpret these to his peers and serve as an "opinion leader" on this subject. Persons less familiar with the topic seek out the opinion leader for information and, indeed, frequently tend to make decisions, e.g., for whom to

⁴⁰The Viet Cong, and probably the Pathet Lao, have adopted the agitation—propaganda dichotomy known to us from the Soviet Union. Thus, this radio broadcast was probably "propaganda," i.e., intended for the information of the PL cadres. The cadres will in turn conduct "agitation," i.e., interpret little tradition phenomena in terms of their great tradition orientation. Alex Inkeles, in *Public Opinion in Soviet Russia: A Study in Mass Persuasion* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1951), pp. 39-43, emphasizes that the two audiences—the cadres (who receive propaganda) and the members of the little tradition (for whom agitation is intended)—receive information on quite different levels. See also Douglas Pike, *Viet Cong: The Organization and Techniques of the National Liberation Front of South Vietnam* (Cambridge, Mass.: MIT Press, 1966), pp. 120-24.

⁴¹This is a significant modification of Redfield's model, which deals with a society composed of a *single* great tradition connected to the peasant little tradition by a joint or link (we have referred to the members of this group as "links"; the term used by Katz and Lazarsfeld, *op. cit.*, is "opinion leaders"). We should note that the Pathet Lao claim to be a part of the RLG great tradition in the sense that the RLG King is also the nominal PL head of state.

vote or which fashions to follow, on the basis of his recommendations.⁴²

However, Katz and Lazarsfeld are careful to point out that "in the United States it is typically this voluntary factor [i.e., simply not tuning in] that is most likely to account for who is in the audience for a particular communication message."⁴³ In other words, the audience of an opinion leader has voluntarily excluded itself from the tedious task of sifting mass media communications on a given topic, but has the opportunity to reject at any time the opinion leader and directly tune in to the mass media.

This is quite different from the situation in a country such as Laos, where problems of language, literacy, and a basically bifurcated society prevent the villager from circumventing his opinion leader ("link") and directly "tuning in" on a communication from the great tradition, even if he very much wishes to do so. In addition, of course, even access to channels of communication—e.g., radios, newspapers and films—is unavailable to most villagers most of the time. For these reasons, opinion leaders for a Lao village are not only much more crucial to village understanding of outside phenomena, but are also proportionally far less numerous than are opinion leaders in America.

It follows that in a conflict between great traditions, one of the most effective forms of attack would be that directed against opposing opinion leaders. In some cases the opinion leader must be physically eliminated, either through assassination or intimidation, the former removing him completely and the latter eventually forcing him to leave the village. A preferable technique in some situations is to disrupt the contact between the opinion leader and his own government and to reorient him to serve as a link for the alternate great tradition.

Examples of all three of these methods are familiar to us from Laos and Vietnam and a number of South American countries. It should be a sign of alarm when, even before excessive violence is noticed, links—e.g., frightened (or soft) landlords, tax officials, or government medical teams—begin to spend most of their time in urban centers rather than among villagers. (This has been a traditional tendency and was formerly of little consequence to the government. Today, however, in areas containing a potentially alternate great tradition, this tendency can be fatal for the elite in power). Vietnamese landlords resident in Saigon supplied the Viet Minh, and later the Viet Cong, with the opportunity to carry out a highly popular land reform program.⁴⁴

Violence directed against members of the link, including village headmen, missionaries, and even technical aid teams (such as appears to be occurring in the Thai Northeast today and which occurred in South Vietnam from about 1957), is a sure sign that an opposing elite has begun to exert its in-

⁴²Katz, "The Two-Step Flow . . .," *op. cit.*, pp. 73-74.

⁴³Katz and Lazarsfeld, *Personal Influences . . .*, *op. cit.*, p. 21.

⁴⁴Bernard Fall, *The Two Viet-Nams* (rev. ed.; New York: Frederick A. Praeger, 1964), pp. 308-309. In Laos today, "many district officers from provinces . . . with substantial areas under communist control, are actually resident in [the cities of] Vientiane or Savannakhet." Haight, *op. cit.*, p. 1.

fluence.⁴⁵ Although cooperation of local leaders with the opposing administration is difficult to detect, nonpayment of customary taxes is, as Fall pointed out about Vietnam, a significant sign.⁴⁶

The opposing elite can only cause unrest among villagers if its work is confined to the mere elimination of members of the link. Significantly, however, the effort does not usually end at this point. The Pathet Lao and Viet Cong, for example, are very careful to present new opinion leaders to the villagers to serve as a positive alternative to those eliminated.

This is a crucial point. It is true, as Fall and others point out,⁴⁷ that the execution of an opinion leader is frequently undertaken in the village with a deliberate show of force. I would conclude, however, that *if* reorientation of the villagers by the new opinion leaders can be at least minimally carried out, *the new government may appear to be as legitimate* a recipient of taxes and labor services as was the earlier one. It is to be emphasized that this legitimacy will be a result of the dependence of the little tradition on a great tradition, as discussed by Redfield and implied in our discussion of Katz and Lazarsfeld above, and will be in addition to any popular support the new links gain through articulation of generally held values (e.g., Lao Theung equality with ethnic Lao).

Indeed, villagers may be intimidated by the show of force against the old opinion leader. However, given skillful demonstration by the new opinion leaders that the villagers themselves have little to fear, *control by the new links of great tradition communications may provide the basis of village compliance* in the traditional manner of accommodation to government authority as well as out of fear of the consequences of disobedience. (It is clear that the new opinion leaders, even if they are native members of the village, face a delicate task. That they are not always successful is attested to by the presence in Laos and Vietnam of whole villages which have fled together to areas still under the control of the legal government. This is especially true of the Meo of Laos, a large number of whom seem to have been permanently alienated by the Pathet Lao).

It is true that the control of channels of communication from the great tradition will not alone evoke more than the traditional passive compliance of villagers.⁴⁸ The argument of this paper is that the new government will probably be seen as legitimate.⁴⁹ It is the genius of the Pathet Lao and Viet Cong that, through the application of nontraditional techniques of popular

⁴⁵Bernard Fall, "Viet Cong, the Unseen Enemy in Viet-Nam," in Marcus G. Raskin and Bernard Fall (eds.), *The Viet-Nam Reader* (New York: Vintage books, 1966), pp. 257-58.

⁴⁶Bernard Fall, "Viet-Nam—the Agonizing Reappraisal," in Raskin and Fall, *op. cit.*, pp. 333-35.

⁴⁷Fall, *The Two Viet-Nams*, *op. cit.*, pp. 137-38.

⁴⁸See J. M. Halpern, *op. cit.*, p. 14.

⁴⁹At the risk of being considered repetitious, I would like to note that our own value judgment that the new administration is not a legal one should not blind us to the fact that this illegality may not at all be apparent to a peasant population accustomed to the new opinion leaders. Since this paper focuses on the role of the peasant in the Lao elite conflict, I have attempted to suspend concepts of legality in this discussion.

education, they frequently evoke much more enthusiastic support as well. One suspects that many traditional governments in the not-too-distant future will be forced into a struggle with an alternative elite for the allegiance of their villagers. It is hoped that this paper provides some insights into the nature of such conflict and the environment in which the struggle will take place.