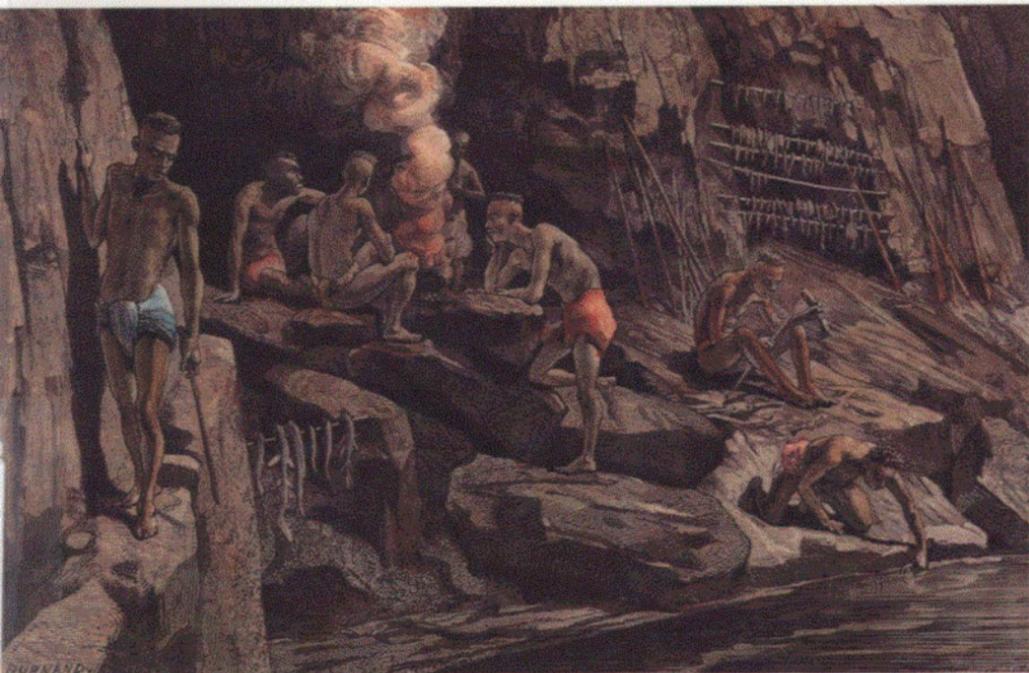


Laos and the Hilltribes of Indochina

F. J. Harmand



Laos and The Hilltribes of Indochina: Journeys
Harmand F. J.

LAO.3672.00

WINTER 2003

etus

Books on Cambodia

Fujiwara, Hiroshi, *Khmer Ceramics from the Kamraten Collection*

Jennar, Raoul M., *The Cambodian Constitutions (1953–1993)*

Thion, Serge, *Watching Cambodia*

Zhou Mei, *Radio UNTAC of Cambodia*

White Lotus Historical Reprints

Bangkok Times, *The 1894 Directory for Bangkok and Siam*

Baudesson, Henry, *Indochina and Its Primitive People*

Carné, Louis de, *Travels on the Mekong*

Clifford, Hugh, *Further India*

Dodd, W.C., *The Tai Race*

French in Indochina (The)

Gilhodes, C., *Kachin Religion and Customs*

Hallet, H.S., *A Thousand Miles on an Elephant in the Shan States*

Hutchinson, E.W., *1688 Revolution in Siam*

Kloss, C. Boden, *In the Andamans and Nicobars: Adventures in Ethnology and Natural History*

Le May, R., *An Asian Arcady*

MacGregor, John, *Through the Buffer State*

McCarthy, James, *Surveying and Exploring in Siam*

Morgenthauer, Hans, *Impressions of the Siamese-Malayan Jungle*

Neale, F.A. *Narrative of a Residence in Siam*

O'Connor, V.C. Scott, *Mandalay*

Smyth, H. Warington, *Five Years in Siam*

Turpin, F.H., *History of the Kingdom of Siam and the Revolutions That Have Caused the Overthrow of the Empire up to 1770*

Vincent, Frank, *The Land of the White Elephant*

Wright, Arnold, *Twentieth Century Impressions of Siam*

White Lotus Historical Works in Translation

Bassenne, Marthe, *In Laos and Siam*

Buls, Charles, *Siamese Sketches*

Garnier, Francis, *Travels in Cambodia and Parts of Laos*

Garnier, Francis, *Further Travels in Laos and Yunnan*

Jottrand, Mr & Mrs Émile, *In Siam, The Diary of a Legal Adviser of King Chulalongkorn's Government*

Lefèvre, E., *Travels in Laos, The Fate of the Sip Song Pana and Muong Sing (1894–1896)*

Books on Burma

Aung Aung Taik, *Visions of Shwedagon*

Htin Aung, *Folk Elements in Burmese Buddhism*

Karow, Otto, *Burmese Buddhist Sculpture*

Kin Oung, *Who Killed Aung San? (Revised and Expanded 2nd Edition)*

King, Winston L., *A Thousand Lives Away: Buddhism in Contemporary Burma*

Lintner, Bertil, *Aung San Suu Kyi and Burma's Unfinished Renaissance*

Lintner, Bertil, *Burma in Revolt, Opium and Insurgency Since 1948*

O'Brien, Harriet, *Forgotten Land*

Pichard, Pierre, *The Pentagonal Monuments of Pagan*

Ray, Nihar-Ranjan, *Sanskrit Buddhism in Burma*

Laos and the Hilltribes of Indochina

South
east
Asia

Community Resource Center

Folsom Cordova USD
2460 Cordova Lane
Rancho Cordova, CA 95670

REN 98199

12198



Doctor François Jules Harmand

Laos and the Hilltribes of Indochina

**Journeys to the Boloven Plateau,
from Bassac to Hué through Laos,
and to the Origins of the Thai**

F. J. Harmand

Translation and Introduction

by

Walter E. J. Tips



White Lotus Press

© 1997 by Walter E. J. Tips. All rights reserved.

Originally published as *Le Laos et les populations Sauvages de L'Indochine* in *Le Tour du Monde*, Vol. 38, No. 965-967, pp. 1-48; Vol. 39, No. 1006-1010, pp. 241-320, 1878-79, Paris.

White Lotus Co. Ltd.

G.P.O. Box 1141

Bangkok 10501

Thailand

Telephone: (662) 332-4915 and (662) 741-6288-9

Fax: (662) 311-4575 and (662) 741-6287

E-mail: ande@loxinfo.co.th

Typeset by Ua-fua Literary Services

Printed in Thailand

ISBN 974-8496-99-6 pbk White Lotus Co. Ltd., Bangkok

ISBN 1-879155-93-1 pbk White Lotus Co. Ltd., Cheney

Front cover picture: A Laotian fisherman's camp on the rocks
of the Mekong (Harmand, 1879).

Back cover picture: Arrival at Lakon (Harmand, 1879).

Contents

Introduction	ix
Foreword by Jules Harmand	xxiii
Chapter 1	1
Bassac—The prince of Bassac—The ruins of Wat Phou	
Chapter 2	17
The prince of Oubon—The hunt for hilltribe people	
Chapter 3	25
Departure for Attopeu—The elephants—The first tribes	
Chapter 4	37
From Kamphô to Attopeu	
Chapter 5	43
Attopeu—The Sé Kéman—Cholera among the tribes	
Chapter 6	59
Return to Attopeu—The disinterments—Departure for the great plateaus	
Chapter 7	73
From Attopeu to the plateaus—The Kha Sók	
Chapter 8	79
Ban Ka Gnac—The Kha Gnia-heun—The Burmese in Laos	

Chapter 9	85
The Sé Noi waterfalls—The plateau—The Kha Boloven	
Chapter 10	105
Return to Bassac	
Chapter 11	109
Departure from Bassac—Good-bye to the authorities—The water feast —How to install yourself in a canoe—The first rains—The first rapids	
Chapter 12	119
Kemmerat—The mouth of the Sé Bang Hieng—The rapids of Kheng Don Saâ—The great pagoda of Peunom	
Chapter 13	129
Lakon—The Annamite colony—The mountains of Lakon—The mistrust of the Laotian authorities	
Chapter 14	141
The rainy season at the foot of the mountains—The caves—Good-bye to the Nam Khong—Departure from Lakon—Muong Phou Wa— Discussions with the mandarins	
Chapter 15	153
The forces of inertia of the Laotians—Useful diplomacy—Departure for Nam Nau—The Souë and Phelong tribesmen	
Chapter 16	161
The pagodas of the left bank of the Great River—Falan—The continuation of the <i>Bo mi, bo day!</i> comedy—Arithmetic and the indifference of the locals—Heading for the Sé Bang Hieng	
Chapter 17	173
From Phong to the Sé Bang Hieng—A deserved punishment—The governor of Song Khon—New attempts	

Chapter 18	179
Exploration of the Sé Bang Hieng—Passage of the rapids—A meeting with wild elephants	
Chapter 19	191
The Sé Bang Hieng below the rapids The Kha Temep—Gripped by famine	
Chapter 20	201
From the Sé Bang Hieng to Phong- Attractiveness of the rainy season—The Kha Tè Douon—A sacred tree The forest of Dong Kephô	
Chapter 21	217
Muong Phin The Pou Thay and the provinces tributary to Annam—An Annamite's ruse	
Chapter 22	223
On the road across the bogs—The course of the Sé Tchepôn and its rapids -Arrival at the first Annamite fort	
Chapter 23	235
The influence of slavery—A stay at Dinh—Deportation among the Annamites -On the road in the mountains—The first <i>huyen</i>	
Chapter 24	247
Annamite policy—Towards adventure!— <i>Moi</i> hospitality— Crossing over the high mountain chain— Cam-lô	
Chapter 25	257
The Christian Annamites—The great road to Tonkin- The fort of Quang-Tri—The Bo-Lieou mission—Arrival in Hué	
Notes	267

Introduction

Dr. Jules Harmand described the circumstances of his journey in the preface to his account: "Coming back from the Tonkin expedition which ended so disastrously with the death of Fr. Garnier in 1874, I sought and obtained a scientific mission in Indochina." Thus, as the second part of his explorations, in February and March 1877, he traveled on the left bank of the Mekong, starting from Bassac to Lakon. From there he moved in the direction of the coast of Annam, passing through the interior, partly along the Sé Bang Hieng valley, and generally following a line almost perpendicular to the Mekong. The second trip lasted from April to August 1877. Only a very few of his descriptions cover areas already visited by the Mekong Commission of D. de Lagrée and Fr. Garnier in 1866-67.¹ Indeed, while the Garnier mission had ultimately shown that the Mekong was unsuitable for North-South trade, there still was the prospect of building a West-East trade axis from Upper or Central Laos to the coast of what was then Annam, soon to be a French protectorate, now Vietnam. This second axis would then connect with the Korat-Bangkok axis on one side -- provided Siam could be placed under a French protectorate—and with Saigon, the center of the French Cochinchina colony, at the other end.

Dr. Harmand was one of those, now reviled, cultural barbarians who, in the name of bringing civilization, blindly trampled upon viable civilizations—quite prepared to destroy them wholesale without thought or regret—who were so typical of the nineteenth century colonialist adventures. He was, from the point of view of his disposition, impatient, flamboyant, uncompromising, totally unequipped temperamentally to deal with the indolent Laotian tribes who had their own imperatives of action

Laos and the Hilltribes

and notions of time. From the first contact onwards, it was clear that clashes, consisting of more than just mutually unintelligible four-letter-words, would be unavoidable. His views on the natives were gathered in a weighty volume as his grand philosophy, *Domination and Colonisation*, published in the Bibliothèque de Philosophie Scientifique (*sic*) (Paris, Ernest Flammarion, 1910), but we will spare the reader excerpts from this ponderous 370 page tome and give a few of the more tangible examples of the praxis that resulted from the theory. The presence, though, of a small flaw in the perfect world of this evangelist, ever-ready to help spread French civilization, is indicated by his admiration for India and his efforts to translate John Strackey's volume on another colonial state, *L'Inde* published in 1892, i.e., half-way through his most politically formative years in Southeast Asia.

Mercifully, most of the Kha tribes he encountered simply ran for the hills upon seeing the first white man in their lives, and dispersed in the forest until he had left their village. Most characteristic of his attitude is a passage from chapter five: "The *khio-muong* promises, is it necessary to say, all that one wants him to promise, but when we come to inquire about roads on the left bank of the Sé Kong on which I could travel: *Bo mi* (there are none). Concerning walking several days in this direction: *Bo day* (it's impossible)! These two words constitute the base of the Laotian language. How many times in a day have I heard them during my journey!"

Dr. Harmand, by training a medical doctor and, no doubt, attached to the French Cochinchina administration that was made up mostly of navy men, was also a naturalist with a keen eye for the flowers and animals he pursued with such avidity. His passion seems to have been prying out beetles from dead wood. The animals on his path are invariably struck down, often with his scorn for the stupidity of animals who dared show themselves to him. When approaching the Boloven Plateau, he testified to rare feelings of awe and enthusiasm for natural beauty; the water-falls of the Sé Noi, particularly, caught his fancy. He was also hunting for ethnological objects, which he sometimes picked up in deserted huts and, in some areas, anthropological studies held his interest. The latter were rather difficult

to implement because of the practice of the tribes people to disappear on his arrival but, when he was in a cholera-infested area, he had no objection to digging up some fresh graves to obtain skulls and skeletons – specimens of which, according to his own assertion, were not yet on display in any European museum! He was well-aware that such sacrilege could cost him dearly in Kha country, but whilst not respecting them, it was one of the few times he showed any kind of understanding for the customs of indigenous people.

On his return to Annam, he became even more incensed against the locals – whom he accused of not wishing to reveal to him the road he was searching for. It was more likely that problems of communication were the main impediment in this search, which was eventually successful as he got close enough to bring Annam within the reach of the locals. During these later peregrinations his attention was focused more on the tribes than on the flora and fauna, which, at one point, he described as merely identical to what can be found from the borders of Cochinchina to the North of Laos. Here again, he kept in mind his higher objective, the demise of which, at his own hands, he ironically did not see: “But what can I do?” he complains, “I was, I admit it, strongly inclined to simply resort to the local custom; to grab the governor and his village chiefs, to tie them up and to make them endure a dearly felt beating until they were resigned to talk. This would have been the correct and the only means to get to the truth. Nevertheless, I do not regret not having used it, because I must always have in mind that, in the eyes of the populations, I represent a higher civilization. . . .”

Dr. Harmand, although he showed himself moved by nature’s beauty on several occasions, was also an avid hunter which, in the context of the abundance of game of the nineteenth century, meant that he shot, for the sport of it, not only in the spirit of scientific inquiry or for food, anything that moved. The following passage may testify to this, but the reader should be warned that Dr. Harmand has no great regard for elephants as beasts of burden and had been marked, physically, by several abysmal

trips on elephant back before launching the following senseless action against a group of elephants on the Sé Bang Hieng: “By misfortune, not having the intention to hunt for such big game during this short exploration, I have left my Devisme rifle with explosive shells in Song Khon and I did not have much chance to do much harm to elephants with my hunting rifle. Nevertheless I risked a shot, despite the pleas of my oarsmen, because in reality there was no danger at all: in case the enemy faced me, my light canoe, ready for any event, could flee like an arrow by holding it in the middle of the rapids. I quietly aimed at the biggest one, which presented its flank to me, and immediately after my shot, he jumped out of the river, his ribs streaked with a long trail of blood. He hesitated a moment, his trunk stretched towards us, his ears standing out from his skull. Then, quickly, he made an about-turn with his companions and all, without rushing too much, with this singular mixture of ponderousness and suppleness which is their very own, climbed to the heights of the steep bank and disappeared into the forest where it would be wise not to follow them.” Such attitudes were ubiquitous in nineteenth century accounts of explorations in virgin territory but, even at that time, as Francis Garnier testified in his own account preceding the present one by only a few years, shooting big game that cannot be recovered from the forest for consumption was judged to be a senseless activity unworthy of officers and gentlemen.

Dr. Harmand’s clashes with officials, however low ranking or informal they might have been, were invariably little wars, to this witness his attempts to deal with the local dignitary (*khio-muong*) in Attopeu: “In the end I return to him, as difficult as this step is for me, to request him to buy supplies for the road, especially chickens. He receives me, still squatted amidst his guns and has the audacity to answer me that, if I want chickens, I only have to kill them in the village. I immediately send for two of my guns, I call ‘A-hoi’, give him one and, from the height of the platform, under the eyes of the *khio-muong* himself, I start a general massacre of his farm-yard.” It was not by this kind of hot-blooded reactions that local dignitaries were won over, but Dr. Harmand was intelligent enough to see

the fear in the eyes of local officials and to take advantage of their ignorance of the larger aims their superiors may have pursued with this French creature. But even this crass episode was not the most damaging Dr. Harmand recorded in his diary, totally oblivious of his own vanity and self-righteousness so eternally exposed. The pinnacle of his outrageous behavior occurred when he was still searching for a way to reach Annam and finally resorted to physical violence. The victim was a mandarin who followed his superior's orders, i.e., to know nothing, not even the name of a river that flowed at his feet: "The first, whom I question on the S c Bang Hheng, answers that he does not know the river. This time I no longer hold out and launching myself in one jump from the camp bed I was stretching on to calm down from the bitter memories which were left from the walk with the limping elephant, I stop his last *bo hou tiac* in his mouth with a slap they will talk about a long time in Song Khon." But sometimes he is more sensible: "The ordinary refrain of *bo mi, bo day, bo hou tiac* (there are none, it is impossible, we do not know) soon runs its course. The mountains? *Bo hou tiac!* The Kha? *Bo mi!* The road to the lead mines? *Bo day!* I count on the contents of my cases to open up their minds".

Another instance of his presumed cultural and racial superiority, based on the fact of his white skin, occurred when he was not shown sufficient respect in a meeting with some local princes in Bassac. How could he be shown respect? He was totally deprived of any signs that designated him as a dignitary: no gold, no tea pots or betel boxes, not even decent clothes. Just like Garnier during the Mekong Exploration Mission he ended up crawling through the jungles, barefoot, with insufficient men and barely any means, financial or other. However, when Annamite slaves come to seek his help, Dr. Harmand suddenly remembered the customs of the country, and, perhaps also, took thought for his own safety. He pondered: "What can I do? Upon my return, I will inform them of my passage and, if they want to seek refuge with me, I will not chase them away, but I cannot openly demand them to and oppose the customs of the country".

Laos and the Hilltribes

But not much later, visiting a Kha village infested by cholera, he remarked: "What a life and what a death these disinherited people suffer! How is it possible that these people who, after all, do not give the appearance of being deprived of intelligence, and who certainly have their heads composed as well as the Laotians, have remained so inferior to them? This degradation is no doubt the result of the fear which constantly depresses their souls, a fear which originates especially in slavery and the perpetual insecurity which torments them relentlessly and mercilessly. Who knows whether, if this odious trade disappears, they will not little-by-little lift themselves up on the scale of humanity? Well then, I think, after having seen things from close up, that the suppression of slavery, far from being here, as on the African continent, a grand utopia, is easy to implement. I am convinced that one need only a little money and a few years, not perhaps to completely suppress this sad business, but to reduce it considerably." But when being confronted with the Annamite colony in Lakon, Dr. Harmand was again caught up in the grand dreams of colonial activists: "The example of these pioneers will not be forgotten. Quite a number of families, better instructed about the state of Laos and feeling cramped on this constricted strip of land on the Annamite coast which is overpopulated, will then search for land to clear, outlets for their commercial activity and regions entirely suitable for their abilities in the Mckong Valley. In one word, we can count on the Annamites, when they become our subjects, to colonize a great deal of the valley of the great Indochinese river to our benefit, where they will quickly supplant the leftovers of the decrepit races which inhabit it. We ourselves cannot try any enterprise in these rich but so unproductive regions by want of the present possessors. First the Laotians must be eliminated, not by violent means, but by the natural impact of competition and the supremacy of the fittest." And the French colonialist saw that all was sound and fair and he collected. . . . It is perhaps interesting to note again here that this book was published in a most respectable nineteenth century travel magazine, *Le Tour du Monde*, and typifies whole generations of explorers,

administrators and politicians, not only in France but also in Britain and other nascent European powers.

Having finally arriving on the Boloven Plateau after dragging himself through cholera-infested valleys, Dr. Harmand was enchanted, both with the natural riches and with the Kha Boloven whom he believed might not have been Kha: their skin was fairer, especially of the women, who were “indisputably beautiful”, and their eyes were not slanted and big. He concluded: “I believe that the Boloven, at least those who live close to the great river and who live, due to their almost complete assimilation, in a state of security as complete as that of the Laotians, are more endowed physically and intellectually than the Laotians and this may provide the greatest hopes for the future of the Indochinese tribes.” There is hope after all. Indeed, Harmand, sometimes betraying his bigoted nature, remained sympathetic to the plight of the tribal peoples—whom he clearly placed much lower on the scale of humanity than Frenchmen, as he did the Laotians. At the end of the third chapter he went so far as to search for the causes of a general state of fragmentation, village by village, among the “wild people”: “It is from this infinite breaking up that, for the greater part, the state of lowliness of these peoples results. It is true that one could say that, on the contrary, their lack of cohesion is the consequence of their defective intelligence. I believe there is nothing to this and that their miserable condition is especially the consequence of the absolute absence of security. If these unfortunate people have remained so inferior, it must derive from particular, contingent causes. I believe that they are, but only originally, at least equal to the Laotians and Cambodians, who have nevertheless been able to lift themselves up, as a nation, to a higher level”. He also rejected the label “tribe” for their social organization because, clearly, there was no higher organization than a hamlet or, at the most, a village. They did not know or understand the labels that others had assigned them, e.g. “*kouy*”, which is almost as generic as *moi* or *kha* in many texts, simply means “man”, remarked Harmand. Besides, the French word “*sauvage*”, which literally means “savage,” is used throughout

Laos and the Hilltribes

his book, but in a modern context, this would perhaps have a much more pejorative flavor than Harmand intended. The word would, therefore, convey the wrong intent to modern readers. Hence, “tribesmen” has been substituted throughout the text, although we have just noted that there was virtually no tribal organization. “Wild people” would have been another, less “politically correct”, label.

One of Dr. Harmand’s main contributions in this book was, perhaps, that he prepared the way for future naturalists to explore the Boloven Plateau, the natural richness of which he spoke of so very highly. The area owes its richness to a large variation in environment over relatively short distances, from tropical wet to almost temperate deciduous forests, swamps and other unique environments around a large number of torrential and semi-permanent rivers and on several types of soils. He rated the landscapes on the plateau as the most beautiful he had ever seen in Indochina, perhaps in his life. However, the rich and extensive flora and fauna collections, mostly from the Boloven Plateau and the area around Lakon, which he sent to Phnom Penh in the care of the prince of Bassac, appear to have deteriorated completely, except for a few animals preserved in alcohol. The poor preservation, due to a lack of appropriate drying materials, the humidity of the rainy season and the eleven month journey from Lakon to Phnom Penh were the main reasons for this incalculable loss.

His second trip from Lakon, across the mountain chains of central Laos and Annam, to Quang-Tri on the coast of present-day Vietnam, was even more adventurous, albeit much less so from the point of view of natural history because, at that stage, his aims were reduced to getting out as quickly as possible and, moreover, he had no more paper on which to dry plant specimens or jars of alcohol to preserve animals, save the occasional snake that could always be fitted into an empty corner. This overland journey from Lakon to the Vietnamese coast was encumbered with problems from the very start. A typical entry of his diary reads: “9 May—The maximum temperature is 38 °C; at 3 p.m. 37.5 °C; at 4 p.m. 37 °C; at 6 p.m. 33 °C; at 10 p.m. 27.2 °C. This time I declare the situation intolerable. I am

convinced that if this horrible temperature still lasts for a further fifteen days, I could not support it. Not only have I lost all my appetite, but I am overtaken by nausea just at the sight of this atrocious rice which I am nevertheless forced to swallow". The Lakon region, where he waited for route information, had no interesting fauna or flora. But when the rains started on 17 May, , totally different problems arose. The rainy season has never been a good season to be on any road in the mountains of Indochina, and the eastern part of Laos is no exception. Dr. Harmand, writing on 6 July from his sickbed, en route to Phin on the border of the Annamese area of influence, indicated another small disaster: "What a weather! What a country! If I can ever leave it alive, I can pride myself that I am solidly built. I was beginning to sleep, suffering a lot, and being tormented by a strong dose of quinine which had constituted my dinner, when one of these Laotian rains, during which earth and water mingle, broke out. My shelter is shredded to pieces by the gusts and I am obliged to witness the drowning of my weapons, my herbarium and my collections. Oh, the life of travelers has hard moments!" Harmand did not indicate the damage done by this storm to his collection.

Dr. Harmand's book also gives us first hand indications of the war between the Annamites and Siamese in the 1840s and of the borderline of the vassal states of Siam prior to the beginning of the dispute with the French, which started precisely in the areas through which this colonial activist traveled. The whole area of Siam on the left bank of the Mekong would ultimately be lost to the French after the 1893 Paknam Incident.² The French claimed it had always been under the influence of Annam, more precisely the court of Hué where a French resident was already present, when Dr. Harmand started this exploration. Ironically, Dr. Harmand's account is only too clear on this point, Annam had no such influence over most of the Lao territory. It is to Dr. Harmand's credit that he put some of these things, often left obscure in other books, exactly right. The border of Siam's dependencies, indicated on his map, reached then as far eastwards as the Sé Tamouok tributary of the Sé Bang Hieng,

itself a major tributary of the Mekong. The furthest influence of the Annamites reached only to the locality of Phin (approx. location $103^{\circ} 40'$ east of the Paris meridian, Dr. Harmand indicates), with some tribes more southwards of this village still being under the influence of the governor in Saravan, on the edge of the plateau, a governor who was in turn a tributary of the king of Bassac. Ultimately, at the end of this chain of vassals, sat the king of Oubon (Ratchathani). More often than not, as tributes were paid roughly per head, local tribes moving to other locations, even outside a certain principality, would remain under the tutelage of their former governor, king or prince. This singular feature of village life in the valleys of the Mekong may partly explain the disputes over people in some areas.

The plates that accompany the original publication in the travel magazine *Le Tour du Monde* were mostly made by E. Burnand, (whose name figures on many of the magazine's plates of this period) on the basis of the drawings and the descriptions of Dr. Harmand. It is unusual that many of these plates actually portray action scenes, not in the least those that depict "heroic" episodes of the journey, whilst in most other travel accounts the plates are invariably descriptive of people, scenery, or ethnographic and natural history curiosities, with the occasional portrait of the explorer thrown in—for a touch of civilization. Dr. Harmand, who is not so reluctant to depict himself, also shows the activities of locals. For example, one plate displays them chasing birds in their rice fields. Here too, Dr. Harmand shows the underlying general attitude he has *vis-à-vis* these "savage" tribesmen; many of their facial traits are close to caricatures of tribal people. The whole atmosphere of the exploration is best summed up in the casual way the explorer sits about, in meetings with dignitaries, or when a tiger is approaching behind him, a cigarette nonchalantly dangling from his fingers. The slight undertone of melancholia in the eyes of Dr. Harmand, revealed in the frontispiece portrait, should not deceive, and there can be seen an undertone of the determination and intrinsic hardness of the man, sometimes moved by pity for "the poor devils", but most often scornful of the inability of lower beings to overcome their "stupidity". In view of the bias shown

in these plates, it is somewhat surprising that we can rarely catch Dr. Harmand in obvious hyperbole. Rather than covering up his failures, he seems to have recorded his feelings and adventures accurately. From the many discrepancies in the spelling of names in the text and on his maps, we may perhaps infer that there has been little editing of the diary upon his return (and, as is usual in French publications, also little copy-editing by the magazine!). The spelling of the names in this translation usually follows what is on Harmand's maps, which should be used when reading the account.

Dr. Harmand himself was very well aware of the limits of his undertaking and of the limited value of his exploration. Towards the end, when he finally penetrated the Pou Thay area, a vassal state of Annam before the war with Siam, he literally said it himself: "From all that precedes, one can see what little value the geographical and political information, collected at a distance during a journey like the one I am about to accomplish, has. In the Mekong Valley itself, nobody has ever talked to me about this vassalage of the Pou Thay, and I could have walked entire months at a distance of a few kilometers from their territory without getting to know, if not by sheer luck, about their existence. All these things are for us of the greatest importance from the point of view of the future of our colonization in Indochina and it is not useless for a Frenchman, who has a little interest in our future influence in the Far East, to reflect upon this for a while." Even the political consequences which would be taken to much greater lengths by those that followed in Dr. Harmand's footsteps; among others, Auguste Pavie, in Laos and ultimately in the Siamese kingdom, did not escape the colonialist explorer: "The day cannot be far off when the necessity of extending our domination over the whole Annamese empire, of which French Cochinchina forms only a small part, will be clear to the least far-sighted. That day the knowledge of the facts which I report here will have a certain importance. Indeed, our rights which substitute themselves for those of the court of Hué and this Pou Thay province will serve us, so-to-speak, as the door through which our

trade and our civilization may penetrate into this Mekong Valley, doomed, without this, to inevitable ruin." Like his predecessors, Fr. Garnier and company, Dr. Harmand quite clearly reveals here to which grand scheme he contributes, besides practicing his hobby of collecting beetles and digging up the occasional skeleton to prove, with the mid-nineteenth century self-righteousness vested in anthropological evidence, that these are primitive, savage, stupid people. But, then again, here is a significant passage, written at the gate of Annam itself, which gives us another view of his talent to truly "understand" these peoples: "Knowing the mistrust of this singular race, the jealous care with which it closes off, if it can, access to its country to foreigners, to the western devils, as they call them, especially when these foreigners are Frenchmen, I ask myself what will happen. However, the Annamite greed and corruption give me cause to hope that I will overcome the resistance which will not fail to materialize. In any case, I was determined to use any means within my power to proceed further."

On the positive side, one must surely mention the well-reasoned pleas of Dr. Harmand to abolish slavery which he considers the key to uplifting all the tribal peoples of Laos and also the *conditio sine qua non* to stimulate trade, not only within Laos, between its various peoples, but also between the Laotian population, the Annamites and the China Sea. Ultimately, even this would not be sufficient to unleash the productive forces so dear to this Frenchman: "I ask myself whether the Annamites do not have the intention of forcing an advance post into the valley of the Sé Bang Hieng which they still regard as rightfully belonging to them. I learn that in the surroundings there are two thousand soldiers spread out over the Moi villages. [. . .] All this is quite interesting for us and I thought to myself: work, work, oh Annamites! Establish yourself in these rich valleys, clear the soil, colonize these provinces, displace these lazy Laotians because the day will come [. . .] when you will have prepared the terrain for masters that are worth more than yours and we will see this country emerge from its age-old lethargy!" However, yet another reality the French were to face is described upon seeing the Annamites busy in their fields from the

heights of the mountain chain that separates their supposedly rich country from the dark forests of Laos: "Surely, there is no doubt that a great distance separates the Annamite civilization from ours. But I do not fear to say so, there is an abyss between the Annamite race and those of the Mekong valley. What a pity that these Annamites are so vicious! But could they not change the day their government and their literary men would be thrown out by a superior power?"

Despite the numerous troubles and disappointments during and after his exploration, Dr. Harmand felt that he, indeed, had made some scientific contributions. Some of the more bizarre were indicated by himself, e.g. in chapter 6: "I chose, in a corner that was well-protected by the thickets, a recent tomb and I ordered my completely stupefied Annamite to use the shovel which I had made him bring along without telling him why, and to exhume the corpse. Seeing his open repugnance I promise him a supplement of one piastre per skeleton to his pay. But to persuade him to cooperate more quickly, I allow him to go back and get A-hoi, my Chinese assistant, who, for a reasonable price, would have exhumed his own mother without batting an eyelid and who would be paid at the same rate. I will not embrace the horrible details of these exhumations which I consider as one of the most meritorious works of my exploration, especially since cholera reigned."

Dr. Walter E. J. Tips
February 1996



Plate I. The big staircase of Wat Phou.

Foreword

by

Jules Harmand

Coming back from the Tonkin expedition which ended so disastrously with the death of Francis Garnier in 1874, I sought and obtained a scientific mission in Indochina—a mission which was made much easier for me by my long stay in Cochinchina and by the nature of my favorite studies. The *Bulletin de la Société de Géographie* has published the principal reports on my previous travels, begun in 1875. In the lines that follow, I will report about one of my journeys undertaken on the left bank of the Mekong, in February and March 1877.³

I have sufficed more or less with the lines that, each night, I wrote in solitude, thinking about the far away day that I would be able to shake the hand of a fellow citizen and exchange with him a few words in my mother tongue.

Notes

¹ See the English translations: *Travels in Cambodia and Part of Laos and Further Travels in Laos and in Yunnan*, published by White Lotus in 1996.

² See Walter F. J. Tips, *Gustave Rolin-Jaequemyns and the Making of Modern Siam. The Diaries and Letters of King Chulalongkorn's General Adviser*; and the companion volume, *Siam's Struggle for Survival. The Gunboat Incident at Paknam and the Franco-Siamese Treaty of October 1893* (White Lotus, 1996).

³ In fact, Harmand has included a second trip from Lakon to Hué in the account (Tran. note).



Plate 2. A buffalo herd in the Bassac plains.

Chapter 1

Bassac—The prince of Bassac—The ruins of Wat Phou

I arrived in Bassac on the first days of February 1877 after having been compelled to divert overland for more than a month around the provinces that had risen up in the revolt of Prince Si-Vatah against his brother, the king of Cambodia.

The Mekong Commission had made a long stopover in Bassac in 1867 and I have nothing new to tell about this town. Moreover, a Laotian village on the river edges hardly differs from one on the heights of the bank it borders except for the more or less number of huts which constitute it. Bassac is the capital of what the natives call the *muong* of a rather large province, administered by a mandarin who is today nothing more than a simple governor, subject to Bangkok. The only thing which distinguishes him from his neighbors is that he has the title *khio* (more or less corresponding to our word "prince") — a dignity which is represented by the possession, or rather the loan, of a teapot, a spittoon, a betel box and a golden platter.¹

We have to say this about the prince of Bassac, i.e., that he does not parade his insignia, of which the others are so proud. One would believe even, judging from his manner and simplicity as well as from the light shadow of sadness that finely veils his expression, that he still remembers the misfortune of his family and that he has not lost all hope of ascending his ancestral throne one day. The prince of Bassac is indeed the last descendant

of the old royal family of Laos, the capital of which, Vinh-khianh (Vien-chan, according to the adopted spelling), was taken and sacked from top to bottom by the Siamese, around 1828 I believe. Today, only ruins, which will soon fade away in the embrace of burgeoning vegetation, are left.

My first task upon arriving in Bassac was to seek the good graces of the prince. Before disembarking, I sent two of my servants, dressed in the grand silk clothes of their festive best, to offer him a few gifts which I had brought for him. In particular, there was a fancy saber with a gilded copper sheath on which I counted a lot. Soon my ambassadors came back with men charged to transport my luggage to the *sala*² which had been assigned to me. It was a narrow and miserably small hut, situated nearby the palisade enclosure of the *muong* and fully exposed to the terrible and uninterrupted rays of the sun.

The envoys of the prince excused themselves for the lack of comfort by telling me that all the *salas* had been taken by the prince of Oubon and his numerous entourage—but that he was there *for only fifteen days at the most*—and that as soon as the “village” of the king of Oubon was built, they would give me housing that was more in keeping with my distinguished merits. Oubon is the capital of a big province on the right bank, governed by a mandarin who had been invested with the same title as his neighbor ten years ago. This province is one of the richest of Laos and its governor holds sway over several neighboring districts. The prince of Oubon had been sent, together with conscripts levied in his province, under the pretext of keeping a watch on the movements of the rebel Si-Vatah—who has never even thought about ascending this high—but, in reality, to spy on the poor prince of Bassac, of whom they were not confident, and who, moreover, had never hidden from me the powerless hatred against the Siamese which he nurtured in his heart.

From the verandah of my small hut, by turning to the west, my view embraced the whole panorama of the Bassac mountains. Its great, almost regular, lines stood out against a sky that was at the same time hazy and full of light. It was in the middle of the dry season and through the trees,

partly stripped of their leaves, turned yellow by the drought and the nocturnal cold, could be seen everywhere the heavy horizontal strata of whitish sandstone which constitutes almost all of the Laotian mountains. Behind the village a big, clayey plain, covered with water during the rains, stretches out, but which, during this time of the year, shows only a jumble of bushes and of tall grass burned by fires, the bitter smoke of which mixes everywhere with the whirlwinds of dust thrown up by buffalo hoofs.

The night fell and the thousand noises of the day weakened to be replaced by the nocturnal harmony of a Laotian village. First of all there are the big wooden bells hanging from the necks of the buffaloes and cows entering their pens, the high-pitched cry of the domesticated elephants which are brought to their bath and which let themselves glide down on the slopes of the high banks. Later, one hears the mute sound of rice pestles rhythmically dropping on the grains of rice in the mortar, and lifted again by the arms of women and young girls. Finally, accompanying the sound of the musical instruments, the tones of which pass over the high palisade of the *muong*, the monotonous chants of the monks, who continue their prayers deep into the night, rise up.

The next morning, I informed the prince about my visit and, putting on an old uniform jacket pulled from the bottom of my box, I went to the gate of the *muong*, located in a square enclosure about eighty meters each side formed by joined posts, about three meters high, pushed into the ground. Inside stood the better maintained huts of the citizens. Handsome beams without carvings support sharp roofs formed with planks overlapping like big roof-tiles. In the middle of the central hut there was a big pedestal table and a few red velvet armchairs of European make on a dais. Along the palm-leaf partitions which separate the rooms, guns, various sabers and beautiful lances adorned with silver were aligned. In a corner, the instruments which compose a Laotian orchestra were assembled: kettledrums, oboes, mouth organs with hard wooden strips, guitars of Cambodian or Siamese origin, and the strange instrument of the hilltribes, made of long, decreasing reed pipes which produces muffled and melancholic sounds.

The prince, who had been informed about my visit, profusely apologized for making me wait; he told me he had spent a long time finding the European shirt which he was wearing freely over his silk *langouti*. I did not have a suitable interpreter and our conversation was reduced to little more than the exchange of some courtesies. The prince did not fail to praise Commander de Lagréc and his officers. Besides, the memory which he seemed to have kept liveliest, like most of the Laotians, was that of Dr. Joubert, whose tall figure and affectionate care had deeply touched them. The name of Commander de Lagréc has been transformed according to the spirit of the language and can also be transliterated as follows: *kô-mang-dang Tê-La-ké*. Higher up, in Lakon, the Laotians, still picking up this famous name, have made the following of it: *ko-mang-dang Tê!* I gave a few more presents still to the mandarins squatted around us and to the eldest son of the prince whom his father introduced to me as being eight years old and . . . having all his teeth. I was questioned at length about my intentions, but in a more discreet and intelligent way than anywhere else in Laos. Thus, it was especially at this time that I deeply regretted the material impossibility which I experienced in recruiting a good interpreter. I noticed the prince began sentences, stopped, and said, smiling: "What is the good of it? We cannot understand each other or discuss!"

The next day I obtained a dugout canoe which I sent, guided by one of my Annamites, to the Island of Khong, the capital of the province of Sitan-dôn (the four thousand isles), to request from the governor (*khio-muong*) the luggage which I had entrusted him more than a year ago.³ As compensation for the trouble which my delay had caused him, I sent him a hunting rifle with a double flint charge—a weapon that is much more appreciated than our rifles with their threatening percussion caps and our most perfected rifles. Upon my request, the prince had promised me ten elephants to proceed to Attopeu as soon as my luggage arrived. I had asked for ten elephants to have five and I must recognize that I was pleasantly surprised when, a few days later, I actually had my ten elephants.

While waiting, I search the monuments visited by Commander de Lagréc in 1867, and designated in the report by the name Wat Phou. I only plan to

make rubbings of the inscriptions which I find there. I will not stop to describe these beautiful ruins, more so because I have found nothing new there. The description which the *Voyage d'Exploration du Mékong* gives of it is perfect, and, not having a single man at my disposal who would be capable of reading the divisions of a tape measure, I could not even think about making a floor-plan, which is a difficult job on these steep and stony slopes. I had found a nice inscription in very fine and spindly letters. I decided to make an imprint of it and to do so, I installed myself on the mountain, in order not to waste my time going back and forth between the village and the ruins, which are separated by a distance of about twelve kilometers. The monuments are located at the southern extremity of the mountains which form a belt behind the village of Bassac on the right bank of the river.

The road which goes there crossed several brooks, entirely dry in February, but with vertically hollowed out banks on arid soil covered entirely with thorny bamboo. The undergrowth is divided up by vast clearings, uncultivated or transformed into ricefields. Small, scattered huts or poor villages rise up here and there. Herds of emaciated buffaloes wander about, searching for their problematic food. The sight of the Laotian plains at the end of the dry season is really terrible. Everything is yellow, covered with dust, or blackened by smoke or still hot ashes of fires. The numerous flowers in flaming red colors of the *Buteas* and the *Erythrines* deprived of their leaves, still increase, if it were possible, instead of hiding this appearance of absolute dryness. Nevertheless, here and there, amidst the undergrowth, the blue flowers of this pretty liana, *Thumbergia Cochinchinensis*, which is so common in Indochina, or the brilliant patches of an old *Sarraca* with its short and knotty trunk, appear.

Approaching the foot of the mountains, one finds the remains of two of these immense lakes which invariably announce the vicinity of some ruin or other. Further, a smaller basin bordered with pretty trees and still, after centuries, holding limpid water which is a precious resource for the inhabitants of these areas who send their cheerful daughters from far to

fill their conical baskets coated with resin. On seeing me, they all flee as fast as possible, abandoning their heavy charges without looking back. It has nothing to do with the willows of the poets and their fear is not playacting. Seduced by the admirable appearance of the place, I noticed one of those small huts which the Laotians like to build in deserted and picturesque places to honor the spirits who are the only ones who wander there. I ignored then that, by choosing this house to install myself, I had committed an act of extraordinary boldness in the eyes of my porters. Of all the men who accompanied me, not one agreed to pass the night there and the next day I was warned that by persisting in sleeping there, I exposed myself to the most terrible illnesses. Seeing my complete indifference to this information, they said, "Quite rightly they say that these Frenchmen are not afraid of anything!", and secretly they came to ask me, one after the other, to give them some of the potion that I used to make myself so courageous. "Answer," I told the interpreter, "that I cannot give them any because I have not had any for a long time. That potion is the milk of our mothers!"

I passed my evenings there and, from daylight, climbing the sculpted steps which lead to the ruins, I went at my inscription with my paper, my brushes and my glue. By noon I saw two Laotians arriving and carrying a basket with my lunch and that of my Annamites, a lunch which invariably consisted of eggs of a lean chicken with curry and a plate of rice. Then, while my imprints were trying to dry in the thick shadow of the abandoned sanctuary, I crisscrossed the mountain in search of flowering plants and trees in fruit which were to increase the richness of my herbarium, catching, and killing ruthlessly lizards, snakes, insects and birds which committed the imprudence of showing themselves to me. Nevertheless, we were already in the middle of February and I did not want to delay my journey to Attopeu. My luggage had arrived from the Island of Khong in a better state of preservation than I had ever hoped for. All that remained to be done was to leave.

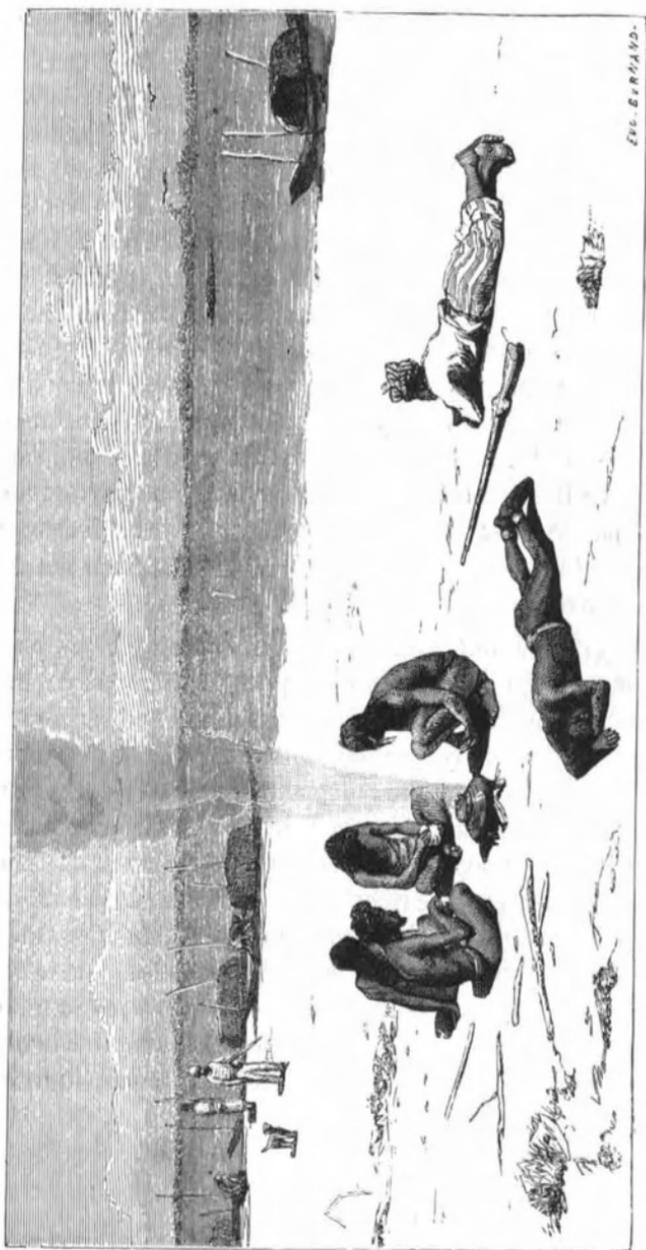
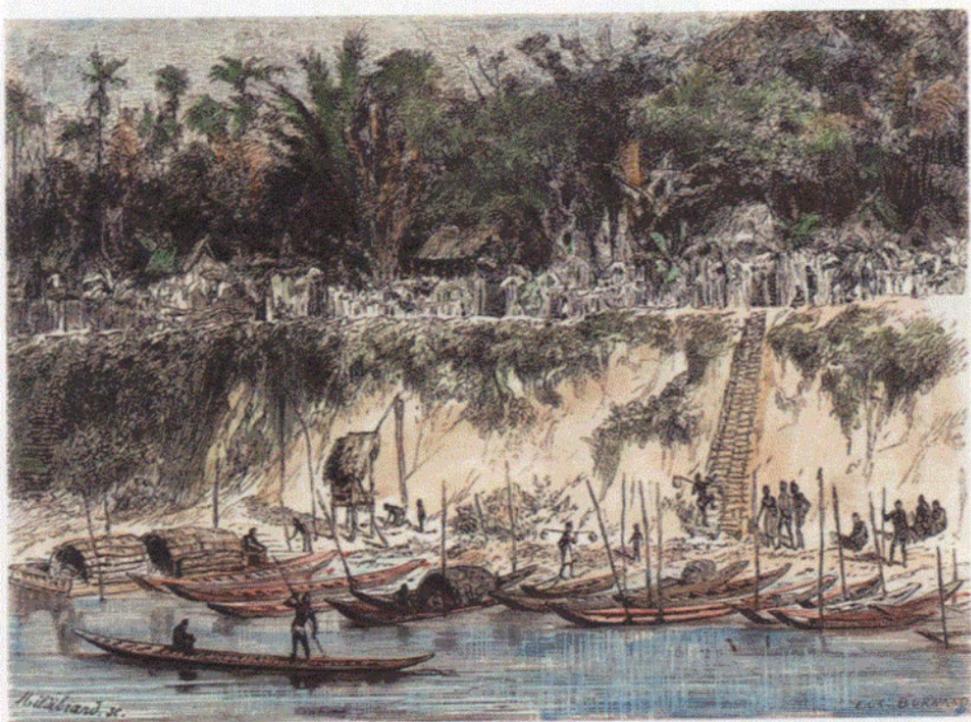
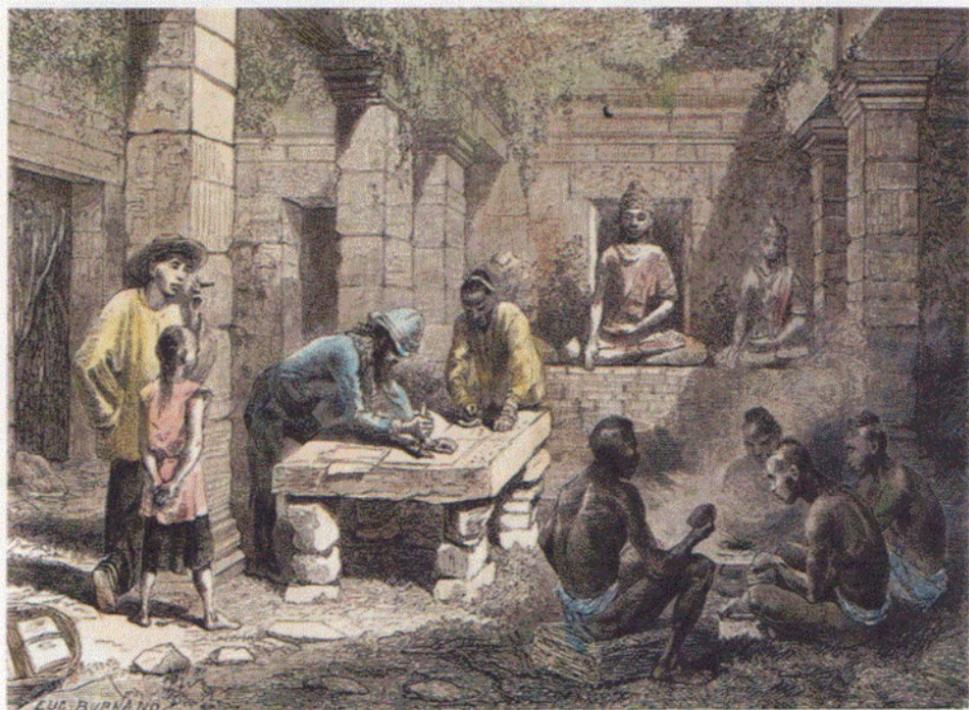


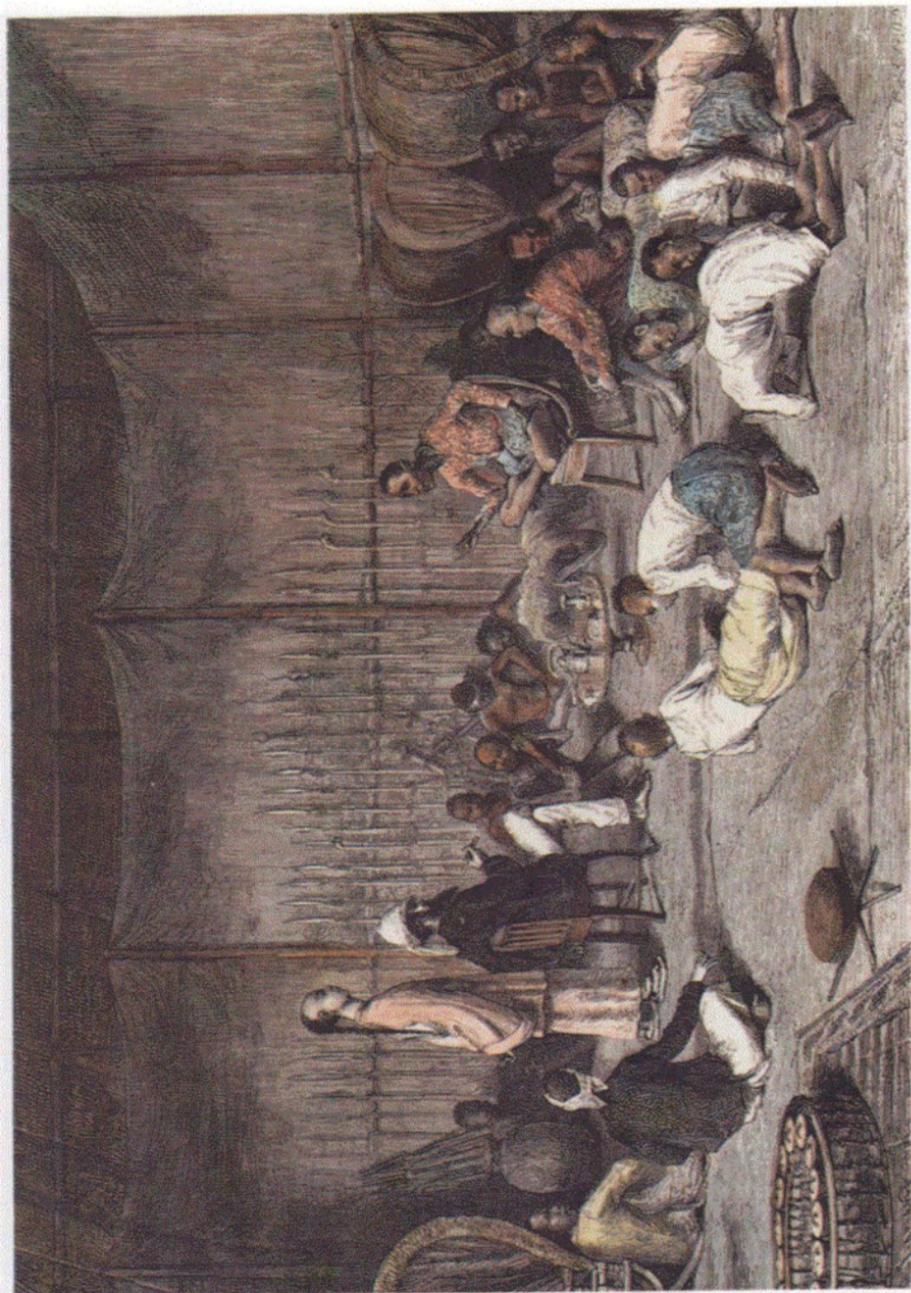
Plate 4. A convoy with tribesmen slaves.



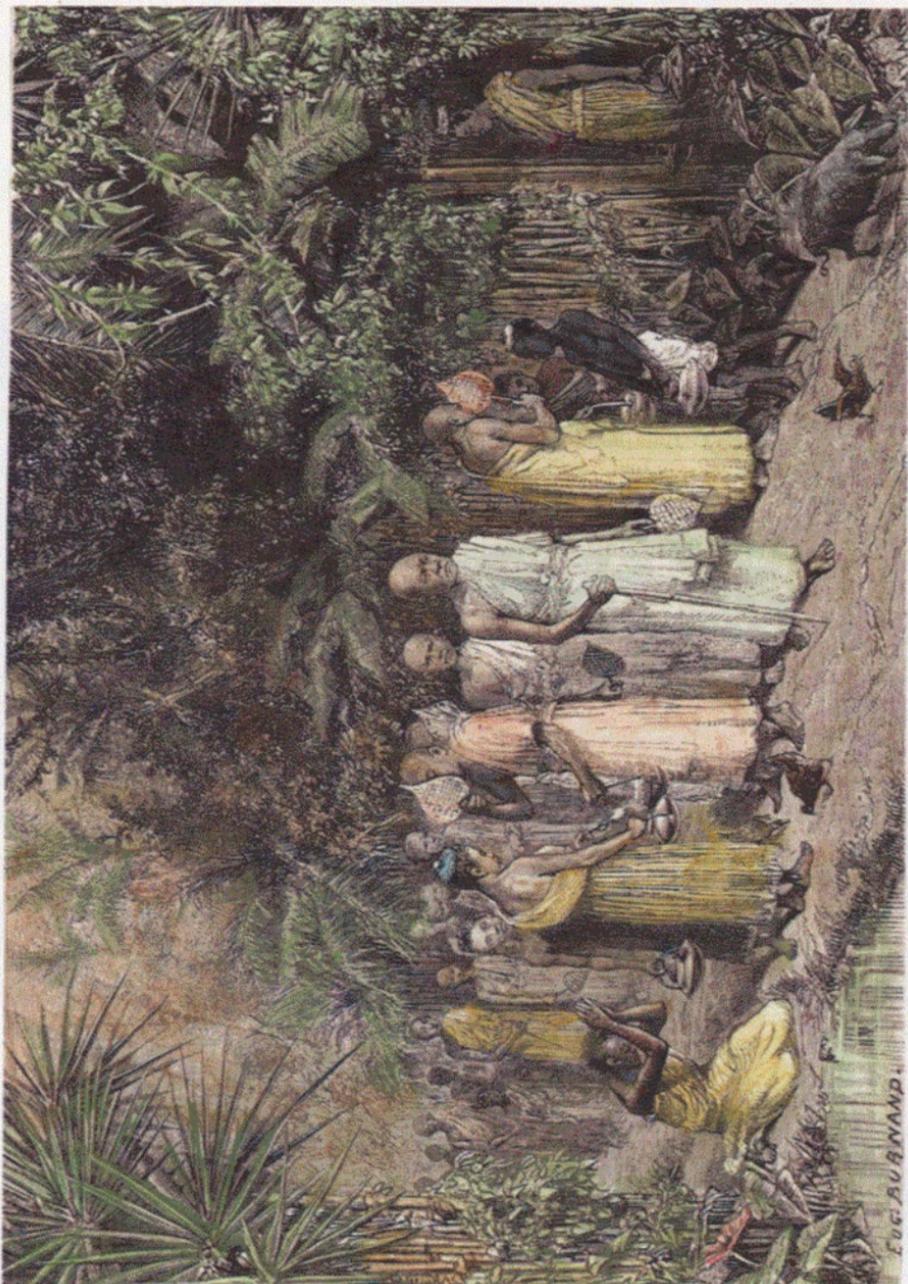
1. A view of Bassac.



2. Making an imprint of an inscription in the Wat Phou temple.



3. Reception by the prince of Oubon.



4. Monks receiving offerings in the town of Bassac.



5. A meeting with a wild elephant herd.



6. Tribesmen clearing forests

much further and meeting with it pleasantly surprises me. The village of Phou Wa consists of only a few huts which sit with their backs against a vertical mountain which has given it its name. A narrow valley separates this mountain from one of the extensions of the chain of Lakon: it is through this way the Sé Bang Fay, which they say originates from a lake, escapes. They also say that its course is partly underground. I will try to shed light on these problems. The setting of the village, with the greenery of its gardens and the ribbon of naked mountains, with their serrated tops, cut out like the jaw of some fantastic carnivore, forms a landscape that is at the same time full of charm and of wildness. Phou Wa is inhabited by a confused mixture of Sô, Phou Thay and Lao.

In the evening, Tay, my Annamite, approaches the governor to ask him for men, or elephants or bullocks, as soon as possible. First they answer that it is impossible to give me men to go to the Annamites because the Kha who inhabit the intermediary regions are very dangerous, or as they tell me, *very wicked*. Finally, after endless shilly-shallying, the *khio-muong* makes up his mind and promises porters for the day after tomorrow.

Upon these good words, I send him the usual gifts and I sleep, intending to dream the sweetest dreams about the pleasures which are waiting for me soon, because, in fifteen days at the most, I hope to have concluded this wild existence of a wandering Jew.

3 June—Early in the morning I prepare myself to receive the visit of the authorities. These meetings, despite their monotony, possess a certain appeal: it is especially the look of the speakers that amuses me and each time I examine with a new curiosity all the efforts they make to give themselves a posture, to compose their face and spout their lies. But this particular meeting was to leave me perplexed. Indeed, the dispositions of the preceding evening, already mediocre, have been changed. After having ruminated, yesterday evening, deep into the night, with his coterie of small mandarins and the small chief of Lakon, after his reflections and his betel, the governor, who is nothing but an almost pure blood

We cross more or less devastated forests, growing on undulating terrain and three small Souë villages, before we reach the ricefields of Muong Phong which are already largely transplanted and which are beginning to be covered with soft greenery. Arriving in Phong, in the dusk of the evening, or rather when the tiger is almost on the prowl, I unofficially inform the governor (who can now not deny that he has toyed with me by hiding the existence of Muong Phin and the road that goes there) that, if he is so unlucky as to approach the pagoda to a distance within the reach of a bamboo stick, I will administer to him the harshest punishment he has ever received with my own hands; I must nevertheless assume that he has already received several which can count in his memory. He has heeded my advise and has not come to oblige me to keep my promise, which, I should say in passing, would have embarrassed and distressed me. Because in the end, far from reproaching him, I thanked God for his stupid defiance to which I owed my exploration of the Séc Bang Hicng. But in this country, it is good to act worse than one is in reality and to growl, for the smallest thing, without ever having the intention of biting.

5 July—It was a day of fever and rage. All the porters are going back and I am too sick to pursue them. They had the honesty to take only the small quantity of rice with them which they need for the return journey, and this is fortunate for my finances, because the indispensable cereal has reached a totally exorbitant price: they give me a small cylindrical basket, which does not contain more than five liters, for one *tical* (3.50 francs). There are big rain showers all day long.

6 July—The governor, no doubt ashamed of his past acts, shows a zeal worthy of the circumstances, and then my Annamites have told him. I assume, that when I have a fever they should not toy with me. Twenty-six men and an elephant are loaded with my luggage and my supplies and the rest of the gang carries rice and salt for their friends, because, this time, I do not want to be stopped by famine and, since they have announced vast, deserted areas or areas which have a general shortage, I have taken liberal precautions: a burnt child dreads the

