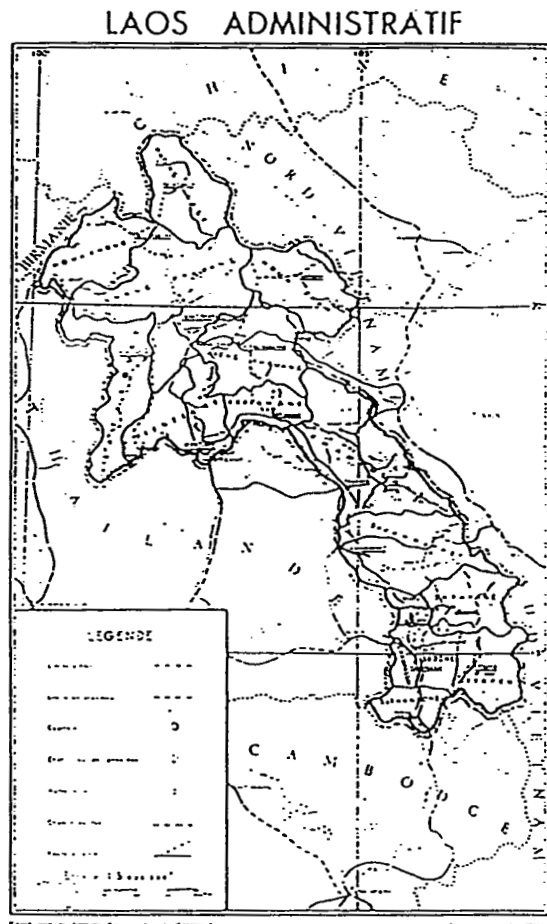


The Meo of Xieng Khouang Province

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THE MEO OF NORTHERN LAOS

The People and the Area:¹

The Meo people spread over the mountain areas of much of South-east Asia. "The Miao, a mountain dwelling people in South and West China, constitute one of the largest aboriginal groups of South China, numbering in the millions."² In North Vietnam the Meo number about 60,000,³ in Thailand a few thousand,⁴ and "in Laos they live scattered in high mountain areas and are said to number about 50,000."⁵

The Meo are in the process of drifting southward. Since they are such vast numbers and yet have no territory of their own, they have been a state of unrest for centuries.⁶ Roux, who has followed the development of Meo history in Indochina, states: "It seems, if one can judge by the transformations which they (the Meo) have carried to the terrain during the forty years that I have followed them, that their first migrations do not go beyond 120 to 140 years. Those who were already 'village elders,' some of whom were over forty years of age, informed me that their fathers came from the extreme west of the Chinese province of 'Sze-Tchouan' from the eastern slopes of the Himalayas,"⁷ This would give credence to statements of the writer's informants that their ancestors first entered Xieng Khouang Province about a century ago.

Xieng Khouang Province is located in northern Laos.⁸ The provincial capital which carries the same name is located about 193.5 degrees east of Greenwich and about 19 degrees north of the equator. The province is largely a plateau of about 4000 feet altitude surrounded by mountains which rise 1000 to 5000 feet above the plateau.

Roux states that an estimated 30,000 Meo lived in the eastern part of the Province of Xieng Khouang in 1920.⁹ It is not surprising, therefore, that a recent estimate (1959) placed the number of Meo in the entire province as 45,000. This estimate was given in conversation by the Laotian governor.

In the Province of Xieng Khouang there is a general classification of the three major ethnic groups according to the toponymy:

Lao. The Lao live principally in river valleys, where they carry on irrigated wet rice culture. In addition to this staple crop, they grow tobacco, straw for making thatched roofs, and divers minor crops. They know some crafts, such as pottery making and weaving, but very few of their number approach the status of specialists. The Lao live in elevated bamboo or

wooden houses with thatched roofs. A very few live in better houses with plastered walls and tile roofs. These are usually government officials and merchants.

The Lao are politically dominant in Laos, but maintain only a narrow margin of authority in Xieng Khouang. They are Buddhistic, and their strong adherence to their religion is a cohesive integrative force in their society. Most males spend some years in the "pagodas" in study. The Lao society and culture appears well integrated with no major stress or unsatisfied needs being evidenced.

Khmu: The Khmu, who are located in the foothills, carry on both wet rice farming and mountain rice horticulture. They live in houses which resemble the Lao in style but which are generally of bamboo, and less durable.

The Khmu are decidedly a political minority. They give little indication of attempting or desiring to attain political autonomy or political recognition.

...the Khmu show signs of deterioration and disintegration. The gongs and jars of tremendous value which are characteristic of tribal peoples in southeast Asia, and which are remembered as a part of Khmu culture of the past, are virtually gone. In all of southeast Asia these gongs and jars are a focal point of interest in the culture. They are symbols of prestige and wealth. The fact that they have disappeared among the Khmu, and that apparently nothing has replaced them, is certainly of significance.¹⁰

The Khmu, who have borrowed much from the Lao, have not adopted Buddhism. They have a form of animism.

Meo: The Meo are usually located high on the flanks of the mountains but just below the summit. Their culture is described in greater detail below, but a few items are given at this point for comparison with the Lao and Khmu.¹¹

The Meo engage primarily in "slash and burn" agriculture. Dry mountain rice is their staple food. Their homes of rough wooden boards are built on the ground. Corn and some vegetables are grown, but they are particularly known for their production of opium.

The Meo appear to have maintained a higher degree of social and political solidarity than the Khmu. In the material culture, the Meo have retained their distinctive dress, are reluctant to use the official local currency, and persist in their traditional habitat. In the abstract and subjective realm, the Meo

continue in an acute consciousness of Meo society and culture, and reflect this consciousness in their rigid refusal to adopt freely elements of Lao culture.

Minor Ethnic Groups: With rare exception, the minor ethnic groups of the province are located in or near Xieng Khouang town. The town, with a population of about 1,500 people, serves as the administrative and commercial center for the province. Vietnamese artisans, Chinese traders, Indian cloth merchants, and representatives of Western cultures may be found in town. The western cultural influence is carried on by those who represent Western governments, serve as missionaries, operate the office of a commercial airline, and a few legionnaires who have settled in the area as ranchers or artisans.

Since this paper will deal with the Meo who live in the general proximity of Xieng Khouang town, the writer feels it worthwhile to give just a brief description of the area. The most prominent building in the town was a huge palatial structure which served as the residence for the French Counsellor. The Laotian governor, entitled "Chao Khoueng," lived in a large but less imposing home. These and a few other buildings were constructed of brick and tile. Such buildings belonged to officials, the French army, and a few local business men. Public buildings consisted of a school, a health clinic, office buildings for the government, and the daily market pavilion. Only one street ran through the town, with the above-mentioned buildings and eight small shops being located along its sides.

Back of these more prominent buildings, the general population lived in scattered clusters of homesteads. Some such clusters might be limited to a single ethnic group, while others might be inhabited by several groups. The dwellings were of any architecture and built of any combination of materials. One sensed that most of the inhabitants considered their residences to be only temporary.

Only the eighth month festival and the daily market served as integrating elements for the community in Xieng Khouang town. The school was limited in its enrolment, and the numerous religious groups precluded any cohesion along religious lines.

Before the arrival of the writer in this area, a road had been maintained from the Coast in Vinh, Viet-Nam, to the border of Thailand. This road passed through Xieng Khouang. Because of difficulties of maintenance during the Communist activities, this road was closed. Travel in and out of the province had to be by plane. A small airline operated the sturdy DC3 planes during the dry season, and a smaller bush plane during the rainy season. Communications were made either by letter or by the public wireless. These services followed a semblance of regularity, but were never certain.

The rainy season served to isolate the area for the most part. Trails were slippery and dangerous, landslides were common, and air travel infrequent and dangerous. Often weeks would pass with no plane being able to land, but supplies and mail continued to come to the area by parachute. In sharp contrast, the dry season brought much activity in town and even to the remote parts of the province. Fields were being cleared to be burned off later. Trails, roads, bridges and buildings were repaired, and merchants competed with one another to charter planes to bring in new stocks and to replenish their supplies. Prices would begin to drop as scarce items became plentiful and the rice was being harvested. Nevertheless, air freight charges made imported products two and three times higher than prices at the coast. People moved about, and the market became an exciting place with many new items appearing on the racks. Such was Xieng Khouang town around which lived the Meo, Lao, and Khmu in ever widening arcs. Except for some groups who had moved into temporary quarters close to town, the nearest Meo village was an hour away by trail. Other villages which were five days away from Xieng Khouang still considered the town as their administrative and trading center.

Xieng Khouang was also the home of a very important Meo personage named Touby. He is singled out at this point because of his unique position. Touby was recognized by the French colonial government, and now is recognized by the independent Laotian government as the representative of the Meo people. He is highly respected by both the government and his own Meo society. Touby and the provincial governor are comparatively young men and maintain a close relationship on both personal and official levels.

Touby has championed the Meo people. While holding a position of influence with the administration, he also commands the respect, confidence, and support of the Meo. He is known throughout the whole area, and the Meo are quick to respond to requests made by him.

Just how and when Touby attained this status is not known to the writer. He lives next to the Lao governor, maintains a Meo militia, and has been influential in having Meo young people admitted to the public schools. During World War II and again during the Communist invasion of 1953-1953, he was given a field station beside the French and Lao commanders, and through his Meo militia furnished the government forces with almost uncanny intelligence and "guerrilla" support. Perhaps the latter is a factor in his present "role." Both the French-Lao administration and the Meo people hated the Japanese and Communist forces. Touby helped to integrate the two groups in driving out these invaders.

Today the government sees Touby as the representative of the Meo and the communicator between the Meo people and the administration. The Meo see Touby from the other side, as one who can influence the government and communicate the "mind" of the Meo to the government in an effective manner. Thus Touby appears to be the "connecting link: between the Lao governmental organization and the Meo's indigenous political system which extends only to the district level. In effect, the various districts are now brought together in an office which they have not instituted but in which Touby has been installed, with power, by the government. He is in a position to bring pressure to bear on the government in behalf of the Meo, and likewise, he is able to influence the Meo toward adherence to the government's programs. For the purpose of this paper, the writer considers Touby as the "paramount chief" of the Meo in Xieng Khouang Province.

Meo Social Organization.

It appears that a patrilineal clan system not only dominates Meo social organization but also serves as a primary integrating factor in Meo culture as a whole. It functions in a cohesive manner to interrelate the social, political, economic, and religious aspects of Meo culture.

The household is the basic unit in the Meo social structure. The term "household" must be treated somewhat loosely, since it need not refer only to those who live in one house. Rather, it includes those persons who are under the authority of the householder. This means that a man's (householder's) household will consist of his wife or wives, his children, their wives and children; and possibly children in the next generation. In addition, the household may have a few relatives who are too feeble, either physically or mentally, to maintain normal responsibilities, and are dependent upon their relatives in this particular household.

Members of a household always carry their clan name in addition to their given names. The clan names generally find their origin in mythology. Complete strangers who are unable to discover any common ancestry but who have the same clan name consider each other to be "clan brothers" and, consequently, observe any formalities or behavior which are therefore incumbent upon them.

Members of the same lineage refer to one another in a common term, ku to kew ti, "my youngers and olders." In the household the members call each other by specific terms which designate the actual relationship of "ego" to any other members of the household. Thus, even in everyday speech language serves to reinforce the traditional social structure in the minds of the Meo and implicitly indoctrinates the children in the same.

The numerical factor determines the actual domicile of the members of a household. One may observe as many as 34 people living under one roof. Frequently a married son may erect a house close to his father's home into which he moves after a child is born. This would not be considered as a new household in the sense that the term is used in this paper.

The household as a unit serves to train the children. Although children are basically the responsibility of their immediate parents, it appears that everyone in the household takes a part in the informal education and training of a younger person. Corrections may be made by elders without incurring the bad will of the parents. One never observes corporal punishment of children, but deep respect and obedience to parents and elders are characteristic of the Meo.

The Meo place high value on old age. In their conception, anyone of old age should have respect. The term of respect in Meo is Txi Lau, "grandfather," or Na Lau, "grandmother." These terms may be applied to younger people who have attained special status and deserve this sort of respect. The Meo train their young people to be self-reliant, and they admire a strong individualistic spirit. A stranger is impressed by the manners and poise that a young Meo boy will demonstrate when he is alone. Among his elders, he is just one of a group in the presence of the respected elders.

Within a household a young man may disagree with his father only in the mildest terms, although he may oppose him strongly. As a man assumes family responsibilities, he may become increasingly self-assertive, but should always pay deference to his aging father. The women are recognized as possessing authority over the children, but in all family considerations the father's word is final authority. Yet, should a father be the son of a householder, he is expected to acquiesce to the will of the householder.

In a Meo village one may find from one to forty houses. The average village has about eight houses. A village may have but one household, in which case the householder has the status of authority. Often there may be several households in a village, in which case the eldest householder usually functions as village head. Furthermore, some large villages have more than one clan represented. In this latter case, some complications appear in the pattern. This will be more fully discussed under "Political Organization."

While a distinct unit in the social organization, the household operates in a sphere which is largely defined by the patrilineal clan system. This is illustrated in the concepts of marriage and the events leading to it.

The practice of exogamous marriage is part of the customary law. In keeping with the principal that no one should marry a person of his own clan, a modified brother-sister taboo is observed between members of the opposite sex when they are of the same clan. Therefore, it is improper for a young man to manifest frivolity with a girl bearing his clan name./

After puberty a young man may attempt to gain the attention of a young girl of his liking. Of course she must be from a different clan. Acquaintance is often made and developed at such events as the New Year Festival Season. A village usually invites villages of another clan to come for festivities, which include games, contests, visiting and feasting. The village is likely to receive a reciprocal invitation before the five-day period is ended.

At such times everyone comes in his or her best clothing along with all the silver ornaments that can be accumulated. Girls proudly wear their colorful skirts as a display of their ability to sew and embroider. The young men demonstrate their prowess with horses and in contests. The playing of various musical instruments and the constant serenades add to the atmosphere of the occasion.

A hand ball game is always in order. Lines of young men form opposite to lines of young women. Partners, each from a different clan, stand facing each other. The girl produces a ball which she has made from wads of cloth. This is tossed back and forth with her partner. Serenading accompanies the tossing of the ball, and may continue for hours at a time. Traditionally, scores are kept of all dropped balls with each error being penalized, whereby the guilty party must discard one garment, as in "strip" piker. The writer never observed this practice in either Christian or non-Christian villages, but he noted other penalties being paid, such as gifts or "dates" for the evening. However, flirting would be a mild term to use for the boy-girl relationship during such festival seasons. The writer has been told by his informants that sex-play is quite free during the evening hours.

If the relationship between a boy and a girl develops into a serious interest for each other, the boy finds excuses to visit her village. Trial marriage, a normal practice among the Meo, is carried on with a semblance of disapproval by the girl's parents. It is customary for a girl who has attained puberty to sleep on a platform apart from the rest of her family. The young suitor may be expected to visit her during the night, but must come and go surreptitiously while the rest of the family is asleep. If the young girl responds favorably to the young man's advances, the romance should end in marriage.

However, marriage can only be realized after considerable maneuvering. The young man must secure a "go-between," usually an elder brother or paternal uncle, who will carry on all negotiations with the girl's parents concerning the young man's intentions. Several developments may occur. The parents may insist that the marriage be postponed until an elder sister's marriage. A satisfactory amount of bride-wealth may not be agreed upon. The parents may insist that their daughter is needed at home for another year until the smaller children are older. If a settlement cannot be reached and the young people are extremely interested in becoming married, they may resort to an elopement. In such a case settlements and adjustments must be made later and often involves a decision being made by a panel of neutrals.

If the intermediary for the young man is successful in arranging a satisfactory amount of bride-wealth with the parents of the girl, marriage is guaranteed. If the bride-wealth is immediately available, marriage formalities may be carried out without delay. Silver neck bands are usually exchanged between the bride and groom.

The family or household of the groom gives a feast for the household of the bride. This is followed two days later by a reciprocal feast being offered by the household of the bride. At these feasts smaller gifts, such as silver rings may be exchanged between the parents and/or the householder, as the case may be. These formalities are the official announcement and legal evidence for the marriage of the young couple. At the same time it serves to encourage close relationships between the two households involved, and to some measure, between the two clans.

Marriage has very important effects on the girl's relationship with her parents. In theory, she leaves her father's family, household and clan. She becomes fully identified with the family of her husband. Should he die, she is responsible to the family of her husband. She has no demands whatsoever on her own father's family. In actual practice she may visit her home frequently, and even continue close relations with her family. After all, there may be other marriages being planned between the two clans or even between the two households. However, the wife never benefits from any inheritance in her original family.

Polygyny is common among the Meo, but is usually the result of the levirate. One case of sororal polygyny was observed by the writer. Wealthy men may be able to have several wives. One of them is considered the more important "big wife" and

directs the activities of the other wives in the matter of household duties. All wives live together under the same roof, and usually share the same sleeping area. They give no appearance of emotional complexes.

Divorce is possible, but not frequent. The Meo frown upon a young man who "runs around" promiscuously in the guise of trying to find a wife. Likewise, the Meo dislike divorce, and attempt in every way to avoid it. The writer was invited to sit on a panel which was to hear the complaints between a young wife and her husband. The panel consisted of the householder from the young man's household, the householder from the wife's former household, and the district chief in whose district the two households were located. Both the young wife and the young husband were permitted to voice their complaints and counter-complaints. Then the panel discussed the situation. The district chief finally summarized the discussion of the panel in strong terms of advice to the young couple. The advice was heeded, and the divorce avoided. This is the general procedure in such controversies, and it helps to maintain the stability of a marriage.

It would seem that the patrilinear clan system of the Meo serves to solidify the marriage and at the same time uses marriage to integrate the clans. Good marital relations are conducive to good clan relationships, which in turn are conducive to further marriages within the clans. The reciprocal element in the festivals, in the marriage feasts, and in finding marriage partners is a strong cohesive factor in inter-clan relationships. The patrilinear clan system must be considered most important to the solidarity of the Meo social organization.

Meo Political Organization

It is difficult to determine the full scope of the traditional Meo political system by observing the people in the Xieng Khouang Province. From the history of the Meo it appears that they possessed a strong and organized kingdom at some time before they entered Laos.¹²

Today the Meo are under the authority of an independent Lao government. Until recently, they were under the French in an "indirect rule" form of administration; this rule was preceded by Japanese occupation troops during World War II, and formerly by the rigid "old colonial" French authority. In spite of this confusion at the summit of administration, the Meo appear only mildly disturbed, and continue with a local political system which seems close to indigenous forms.

The patrilinear clan system with its household unit is an integral factor in the Meo system of authority. On the level of the household, the Meo's social and political systems find root

in common soil. Thus, in describing the household, it seems that one is actually describing the foundations for both Meo social organization and Meo political structure.

Political authority appears to involve the Meo concept of respect for elders. A child is responsible to his father. If he is not a householder, a father is responsible for his family to the householder, who is usually his father, grandfather, or an elder brother. The householder apparently holds an ascribed status of authority which extends over the members of his household. In the smaller conjugal family units which make up the household, the parents must answer to the householder for the behavior of their children. This does not prevent any older person from assisting in the training of any child, as has already been indicated.

The householder has the final authority in matters of the household. Such authority is not of a dictatorial nature, but reflects the householder's considered opinion after discussion with the adult men under his authority. It appears that the degree of authority which the householder holds over his children and his children's children may vary with the proximity of these offspring. The writer illustrates with three examples.

(1) Zon Tsho with his wife and child left the village of his father, and settled several days away in the Xieng Khouang town area. He did not appear to incur any disapproval from the Meo in either area. They considered that he had established a new household.

(2) Ba Si and his wife lived with his parents in their house. His father, the householder, was addicted to opium, and contributed a minimum of effort in providing for the household. This may have been a factor in Ba Si's defection from traditional Meo behavior. Much to his father's disapproval, he frequently procured odd jobs for cash income instead of assisting his father in the householder's rice fields. Although the writer feels that the father was quite incapable of adequately administering his household, the general attitude of the Meo was one of criticism toward Ba Si for his lack of respect and deference to his father. A few criticisms were leveled toward his father for not having properly trained Ba Si to conform to the Meo pattern of authority.

(3) Ntrua, an adolescent, worked for the writer. He lived in Xieng Khouang town. His father came periodically to receive Ntrua's wages. In turn, he gave his son some money for necessary purchases, such as rice and other items for his livelihood. Thus, although he was some distance from his father, Ntrua was clearly under the authority of the father. This was probably due to several factors: the proximity of town, his youth, and the temporary situation of his employment.

However, it would seem that the authority of the householder is not absolute, but may be modified under certain conditions. Ntrua submitted to his father's will without any question or sign of reluctance. Ba Si incurred public disfavor because of his lack of parental respect. Zon Tsho was considered to be following proper procedure in establishing a new household. He was not without a superior authority, since he was still subject to the district chief and also was under the sanctions of his clan.

A village chief is a householder. In a village of one householder, the selection of the chief is automatic. In a village of more than one household, the eldest householder is customarily the village chief. The writer has observed exceptions to this, but cannot explain such unless it would be in recognition of military honors which the individual has received from the government.

On the village level this chief functions between households in much the same manner as the householder does between members of a household. The village has a good measure of autonomy. Therefore, the village chief is more than just a representative of the village; he is an honored leader on the local scene. He holds a place of prestige at the local festivals, is the judge in inter-household disputes, and is expected to administer to the good of the community. He is responsible for the maintenance of the trails, for opening new ones, and for moving operations should the entire village move to a new location. He has authority in emergencies. During the Communist occupation, he was responsible for the evacuation of his village and its defence. Even as the householder in the household, so the chief in his village is not a dictator, but with the counsel of other householders he serves to make the community a cooperative unit. Occasionally some family may feel abused, and move to take up residence in another area, thus forming a new household. This means some hardship until such time as they are able to gain an adequate subsistence in the new location.

When a village consists of more than one clan, problems of harmony are more common. The writer is unaware as to just how these villages developed in this manner. Apparently the government recognizes one chief for such a village, while the local population generally considers two men to be chiefs. The eldest householder of each clan is recognized by his clansmen as their village chief. This is an ascribed status from the Meo viewpoint. In most local affairs there appears to be harmony, but difficulty arises and tensions develop when outside or upper level authority attempts to enforce certain measures through only one of the chiefs. Strong feelings may result in the loss of cooperation between the clans. The writer observed one case which resulted in the minority clan group moving to a new site only five

minutes away. Subsequently, the two groups regained friendly relationships, but remained apart. Inter-marriage appeared to be a real factor in this amelioration.

Above the rank of village chief is a district chief. He may have as many as forty villages under his supervision. It may be at this point that the resemblance with the traditional political organization of the Meo begins to break down. The district chief is appointed by the "paramount chief," Touby, in conjunction with the Lao governor of the province. It seems that Touby attempts to conform with a semblance of what may have been the former Meo pattern in that the district chief is usually a village chief and is selected from the clan which is predominant in the district. The district chief is primarily the communicator between the village and the high office. The district chief is often called to settle disputes between villages or members of different villages. For example, he sat on the panel to listen to the case of the young married couple mentioned above. The husband and wife had been from different villages, and the parents of each desired the district chief to attend.

The Meo are desirous of settling disputes at the lowest level of authority. Thus, inter-family disputes would be settled within the household, inter-household within the village, inter-village disputes within the district, and inter-district within the sphere of Touby's authority. This does not mean that such disputes had to be between mass groups, but might be between individuals from within these unit categories. Seldom do disputes between Meo go beyond Touby. In cases involving the Meo with members of another ethnic group, Touby served as counsel for the Meo. He has proved himself most influential in this respect before both the Lao and French officials.

The economic returns of the political offices are significant but not sufficient to support fully the man and his family. The village chief receives gifts from the villagers, but these do not appear as payment to any overt obligation, but rather to assist him in the hospitality he is expected to show to all travelers. Both the village chief and the district chief are supposed to receive a small commission on all taxes and fees collected. Fees and taxes have been exacted of the Meo only in recent years. Fees may be gathered for marriage and birth certificates. The cooperation of the Meo in this program is increasing.

The writer considers the village to be the extent in which the indigenous Meo political system operates today. The district level seems to be a transition zone which might be likened to a bridge which is anchored on one side in the traditional Meo system on the village level with the other side being firmly entrenched in the national government complex. It seems that

Touby is a major factor in the maintenance of this relationship. It is important to observe that the household is not seriously affected in this situation, and even as it continues to function as the basic unit in the Meo social structure, so it also serves as a strong integrative force in the Meo political organization.

A brief word may be given to indicate the Lao plan of adopting a policy to incorporate all ethnic groups into their political system. Some years back, any individual residing in Laos who could not give sufficient evidence that he was a citizen of another nation was made a citizen of Laos. He was made responsible for taxes, military service, and conformance to Lao law. Enforcement of these rulings, with all the implications involved, has been gradually developed. The various ethnic groups are gradually being introduced to the political system both as it concerns their responsibilities and as it concerns their privileges. Taxes are collected by cash payment or contributed labor. The Meo send representatives to the national assembly, as do the other ethnic groups.

As yet one is not sure whether this is an honest attempt to have these peoples fully represented in the federal government or whether it is a stop-gap measure to stem the apparent nationalistic tendencies of the Meo. The honor and prestige given to Touby and other Meo leaders, the educational facilities being offered to the Meo on an increasing scale, and the other benefits now available would indicate the former motive. A firm ruling against the Meo having their language in written form might indicate the latter motive. At any rate, the political system appears to be in a process of change, and the influence of French domination is decreasing. None of this seems to have seriously affected the indigenous Meo form of authority on the local village level.

Meo Economy

The role of the household in the Meo social and political structure is reflected and illustrated in the Meo economy. The division of labor is clearly related to the social and political patterns. Subsistence, land tenure, property rights, inheritance, and the economic factors relating to marriage and religious rites are all tied into the socio-political aspects of the household.

Rice is the basic food staple for the Meo population in Xieng Khouang. Its production requires the full cooperation of the entire household, and is supervised by the householder. A regular annual cycle is followed in this rice economy.

Planting is carried out at the beginning of the rainy season in late April and May. The work may be done by any members of the

family. During the rainy season some cultivation is done, but generally the rice stalks must fight their own battle with the weeds.

In late October, at the close of the rainy season, the grain ripens quickly and everyone joins in the harvest. Temporary shelters are erected on the field, since it must be watched until the harvest is completed and the rice is safely stored in the village. Hand sickles are used in cutting the rice stalks which are gathered into large stacks right on the field. This is done in urgent haste for fear of losing the over-ripened grain.

The stalks are then flailed and the grain is stored in huge carrying baskets. This work is the main concern of the women. Transportation of the rice to the village may be by human carrier or pack horse. A rice field may be as far as a full day's travel from the village. While the flailing is done by the women, the men prepare granaries to receive the rice. Some are built on strong platforms outside the house, while smaller ones may be erected inside the dwelling. These granaries are usually made of tightly woven bamboo.

During this entire harvesting process every member of the household is involved in the cooperative effort. Feeble elders watch the infants and prepare meals for everyone. Young boys may be seen leading the pack horses laden with grain. Young girls assist their sex in flailing the rice stalks, gathering rice into baskets and performing other chores.

Assured that the harvesting process can be successfully completed, a selected few of the stronger men may actually commence the task of clearing new ground for next year's planting. In the "slash and burn" technique for clearing the field, the heavy vegetation and trees are cut down early in the dry season to give the sun as much time as possible to carry out the drying process before burning time in March. When the rice harvest is complete the men are joined by others of the household who methodically go through the site of the new field and cut down all vegetation.

By March the area should be dry enough to burn and is set afire. After the field has cooled, the entire family sets about clearing the debris, allowing only boulders and tree stumps to remain. The soil is loosened as much as possible after the first rainy days, followed by the planting of the rice, and thus the cycle is continued. Ideally, new ground is cleared each year, and some poorer soil is allowed to lie fallow. A field may be used for three or four successive years.

Potatoes, corn, squash and other minor food crops are grown by the Meo, but play a small part in the economy. Potatoes are sometimes sold to Westerners, but are most commonly used as

fertilizer in the opium field. Corn and squash are used to feed the livestock unless the rice harvest is very slight.

Another important but non-edible crop is the opium poppy. Every household has its opium field. The men erect a woven bamboo fence around a plot of ground near their village. As just mentioned, potatoes are used as fertilizer, and the soil must be carefully prepared. The opium harvest requires much skill and care. Most of the entire process is carried on by the women.

Opium is the main source of cash revenue for the Meo. In fact, it often serves as a medium of exchange. The first missionaries in the area were quite shocked to find carefully wrapped "globs" of opium in the offering at church. Embree writes:

Supposedly the production of opium is controlled by the French authorities, but both they and others are of the opinion that much illicit trade in opium does take place. Some of this doubtless goes to Siam in payment for manufactured goods from England and the United States.¹³

At the time of the writer's field work, Xieng Khouang was the only province in all of Indochina where the government officially permitted the cultivation of the opium poppy. The French administrator told the writer that an estimated 60% of the men of Xieng Khouang Province were addicted to opium. Its great worth and economy of transport makes opium of unique value to the Meo. One kilo of opium is worth one-half ton of rice. It is used as barter in the Xieng Khouang dialy market as well as in the district markets and in the villages. Obviously opium plays a major role in the Meo economy.

Flax is probably less important today than in earlier Meo history. Chinese merchants trade yard goods for opium. Yet one still sees the women spinning the flax on their thighs and storing it in large balls. It is lager woven into long lengths of cloth, and through a mixture of techniques, including cire perdu and dyes, becomes designed materials for the typical Meo skirt. The hem of the skirt is beautifully embroidered in cross stitch with silk threads. Pleats are sewn in by hand and a beautiful skirt is formed, being approximately twenty feet wide at the hem.

Livestock plays a very important part in the Meo economy. Foultry, goats, pigs, buffalo and cattle are found in most vil-lages. They are used for meat in the household and as cash in-come at the market. The Meo are considered adept in their care of animals. This is confirmed by comparing their livestock with those of other ethnic groups including the European ranchers.

