

HISTORY OF LAOS

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By

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HISTORY OF LAOS

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Maha Sila Viravong

History of the Lao Race

Chapter I

Muong Xieng Thong or Souvannaphoum Pathet

The area which constitutes today the territory of Laos included, 2500 years ago, parts of Burma, Malaya, Thailand, Cambodia and Vietnam. It was called then Souvannaphoum Pathet or Laem Thong or Muong Xieng Thong (Thong meaning gold) for the reason that those same areas were known to be rich in gold ores. For this same reason, when the Lao people established themselves in this area they gave the name of Muong Xieng Thong to their capital city. (1) [Footnotes will be found at the end of each chapter].

The area which was known as Souvannaphoum Pathet was in fact a large peninsula which was situated in between the Indian Ocean and the China Sea and this was the reason why, at a later date, the Western world has given this part of land the name of Indochina.

Souvannaphoum Pathet or Indochina was first inhabited by people of Khmer and La-wa or Lwa origin.

The Khmer Race

The Khmer race is of ancient Indian descent. This race has nowadays given birth to various ethnic groups known as the Khmer, Mon, Meng, Kha, Khamu, Malay. The Khmer had established themselves in the south of Indochina before any other races thousands of years ago and has formed two large kingdoms of their own:

1. The Thavaravadi Kingdom or the civilized Kingdom.

This kingdom is situated in the west side, from the territory of Nakorn Pathom in Thailand and covering the Mon and Burmese territory of the east and down to the Malayan strait.

2. The Gotapura Kingdom or Gotapurana which occupied the eastern part of the present province of Vientiane down to the territory of Cambodia.

Gotapura is a Sanskrit word meaning the Kingdom of the East. This same word Gotapura has later become Gotapurana and the Lao people later called it Gotabong or Sigotabong. (The capital city of the Gotapura Kingdom, according to the story of That Phanom, which was at the estuary of the Se-bangfai river, was called Gotapurana City. The capital was later transferred to a place west of That Phanom and was given the name of Marukra Nakorn. Later, in about the year B.E. 318 (225 B.C.), King Sumitra Dhamma Krasat have transferred it again to Saket Nakorn, now Roi Et in Thailand. It was later transferred again from Saket Nakorn to Nakorn Thom while other groups have come to Vientiane).

The capital city of Marukra Nakorn had been at first governed by a Khmer King whose reign lasted to the year B.E. 500 (42 B.C.) and was later abandoned. Several hundred years later, when the Lao people had recovered all these territories, they have rebuilt the city of Marukra Nakorn on the left bank of the Mekong river which is now the site of Muong Kao Thakhek. In the year 1614 A.D. King No-Muong of Pichit-Totstits-Rajdhani had again changed the name of Marukra Nakorn to its former name of Sigotapurana. The Chinese called the kingdom of Sigotapurana as Poh-Nam or Funan or Ponan which is Phanom itself.

These are the facts that led to the belief that the Khmer was the first that had come to inhabit the Indochinese peninsula before any other races:

1. The ancient ruins which can still be seen today in

the areas referred to, namely the stone stupas, the stone walls, the stone pools, all of these bear the marks and the workmanship of the ancient Khmer.

2. The letters and manuscripts which are found on the steles are those of the Khmer who inherited them from the ancient Indians.

3. The spoken languages of the ancient peoples namely the Sney, Kha, Khmer, Malay and Mon have, the same phonetics and tones as the language used today in the training of elephants and wherever you can find these peoples, they still continue to speak the same languages they had spoken in the ancient times.

Causes of the Khmer migration to Souvannaphoum

It is a historical fact that the Khmer have come to settle down in Souvannaphoum Pathet even before the advent of Buddha, 2500 years ago. But the largest migration occurred during the reign of King Asoka Raja who ruled Pataribud from the year 218 to 227 B.E. (325 - 316 B.C.).

The causes of the Khmer or ancient Indian migration to Souvannaphoum Pathet during the reign of King Asoka Raja are reported in the King's bible and on his own stele as follows:

"When Prince Asoka was enthroned as King of Pataibud for about one year, His Majesty's army has invaded and occupied Kalingarad in the south. In this battle, the people of Kalingarad have been killed by hundreds of thousands and as many made prisoners."

Because of this war, thousands of Indians have migrated from the southern part of India to live in Indochina. In the light of this mass migration, King Asoka Raja was so upset and decided to turn to Buddhism to find the solution to end it. In cooperation with a Buddhist priest named Mokkanlibud, King Asoka Raja sent out a number of capable priests to preach and spread Buddhism in many countries of the area in B.E. 236 (307 B.C.). Two Buddhist priests known as Sonakab and Utarah were sent to Souvannaphoum Pathet.

Later, in about the year B.E. 600 (57 A.D.) Brahmanism which was the ancient religion of India had also been practiced in Indochina and led by a Brahman by the name of Konthanya. This same Brahman was later wed to the daughter of

a Khmer king and later became king himself. Since then Brahmanism continued to flourish in Cambodia and when King Jayavarman III came to power, he built the stone temple at Nakorn Thom with Brahman designs in the year 857 A.D. Later, in the year 1057 A.D. another Khmer King built the temple known as Angkor Wat with the same Brahman style and designs. From the years 857 to 1057 A.D. which was exactly 200 years the Khmers reached the peak of their splendor and power in the Indochinese peninsula. In this same period, the Khmers had extended the limits of their territories up to Xieng Sen and Xieng Rai and in this same period, the Lao had started to migrate from the south of China and in their southward drive they had clashed with the Khmers as to be told in the part dealing with the Lao migration in the next chapter.

The Lwa or La-wa Race

After careful studies, we have grounds to believe that the Lwa or La-wa constitutes one major element of the ancient Lao people which had settled down in the northern part of Indochina before the Khmers. The part of land they occupied starts from Lopburi up to the kingdom of Xieng Sen touching the frontier of Yunan of the present Chinese mainland. The Lwa were not as civilized as the Khmers and when the latter pushed their influence toward the north they practically occupied the Lwa territory. As time went by, the Lwa have lost all their originality as well as their power and gradually became Khmer citizens and in turn, the Lao citizens of today known as the Kha.

[Footnotes]

- (1) The area known as Souvannaphoum Pathet was precisely the area in which two priests, Phra Sonakab and Phra Utarah had first come to preach Buddhism in the year 236 B.E. (307 B.C.) during the reign of King Asoka Raja. This according to the compilation of a British professor Ris David who said that Souvannaphoum Pathet also included the land of the Mon from Burma down to the Malayan strait. Another version credited to a Thai philosopher Phra ya Damrong Raja Nupab, who said that Souvannaphoum Pathet was part of the territory of Thailand, precisely the province of Nakorn Pathom due to the fact that one can still find there a monastery and a Dhamma wheel of virtues which were built during the reign of King Asoka Raja. But in another document known as Urangadhat, it was said that Souvannaphoum Pathet was the country of Thao Kham

Bang, in the province of Vientiane and on the present site of the Kao Liu village (Thao Kham Bang who fled from Muong Nong Han is of Khmer origin). But the story book of the Legends of Khun Borom indicates that the frontiers of Laos starts from the province of Vientiane down to the territory of Cambodia. The part of the legends which deals with this particular phase of the story reads as follows:

"The stupas have been brought to Souvannaphoua Pathet at Lak Hin. King Sidhamma Asoka Raja ordered the astrologers to place them in this respective localities in the country: Phra Hang, Phra Narai, Phra Sakien and Phra Nathien at Muong Khouang, Loke Ban, Phra Nom at Phon Fing Dad south of the Pasak river estuary. These stupas were kept in crystal and sandalwood boxes for worship..."

Chapter II

The birth of the Lao race

Many historians agree that our universe has been inhabited by human beings for more than 100,000 years. They also believe that the part of land which was the birthplace of our human race was along and in the vicinity of Altai Mountains in Mongolia.

The human race which came to being then was of many groups but the largest groups of them all which lived in Asia are four in number:

1. The Chinese: who made their living on cattle raising along the southeastern coasts of the Caspian Sea.

2. The Tartars: who lived in the deserts and used horses a great deal in their banditry acts.

3. The Sinuijus: who lived in the part of land now known as Korea and up to Mongolia. Their main profession is also banditry.

4. The Ai-Lao: who established themselves in the valleys between the Hwang Ho and Yang Tse Kiang rivers in the heart of the present day mainland China. The Ai-Lao made their living mainly on agriculture.

The group of people known as the Lao have settled down along the Hwang Ho river valley before the advent of Buddha, 2500 years ago.

The birth of the word "Lao"

The word "Lao" or the Lao people has been recorded in various versions as follows:

a. In the book "History of Thailand" of Luang Vichit Vathakarn, it has been said that the word "Lao" came from the words Lwa or La-wa which were in fact the names of a certain ethnic group who lived in this part of the land long before. When the Thais migrated down to live with them, the Thais called them Lao.

b. In the story book of the legends of Khun Borom, it has been said that the Lao people came to being from two large gourds (which is Lawu in Pali), that was the reason why our people got the name of Lao according to that of the gourds.

c. According to another book on the history of Thailand by Phraya Anuman-rajdhon, it has been otherwise said that before we got the name "Lao", there was the following story:

Long before, there was a certain group of people who lived along the Mekong valley next to a chain of mountains which border the province of Tche-Chwan of the Chinese mainland today. Among this group of people, there was a woman who had nine sons. Before she had her ninth son, it was told that she went fishing in the Mekong river. In the course of this fishing, rough floating trunk of wood hit her about the legs and from that day on she began her ninth pregnancy. When her ninth child grew up to a certain age, his mother took him along to her fishing trip in the Mekong river again. On this trip, while she was fishing, a Naga came by and asked her this question - Where is my son? Perplexed, she had time to say only a word "kao-long" before she ran away leaving her son behind. Then the Naga licked him once on the back. Later when all of her nine sons grew up and had their own family and home, the ninth son grew up to be the most intelligent of them all and became so the undisputable leader. Later, the nine sons of this woman lived to be the ancestors of the Lao people and were for that reason called the Ai-Lao meaning the Lao brothers.

According to the history book of China, these nine brothers are called the Lee brothers and their country was subsequently called Pathet Choke. In the year 2055 before Buddha the Lee brothers were engaged in a big war against the Chinese and so the words Long and Lee should have been the same word and later the tone of this word changed to Lung and to Lwang and finally to Lao. The Chinese word Kao-Long or Kiu-Lung means precisely the nine Lao brothers.

d. Other sources said that the word Lao is the same word as Dao because the Lao people like to live on the highland and they have had an older civilization than that of the Chinese. The words Dao or Thieh, Then, Thai, mean the sky, thus the word Lao should also mean sky and in many cases the letter D could very well be L. And the reason for the Lao to worship the spirits of the sky in the ancient times could very well be the proof of this analogy.

The reasons as given in items c and d show enough trustworthy facts and here are why:

1. According to the history book of China, it has been

said that the territory of the ancient Lao people was in the vicinity of the Ai-Lao mountains which began at the level of the present Tche-Chwan province of the Chinese mainland and the part of the Mekong river where the Ai-Lao brothers lived was called "Kao-Long" which the Chinese have themselves later changed to "Kiu-Lung-Kiang, which means the river of the nine Nagas, thus leading to the belief that this was where the nine Lao brothers or the ancestors of the Lao people really lived. The same book goes on to say that because of the fact that the Lao people are the descendents of the Nagas they still like and worship the dragon, they tatoo dragons on their forearms (and if some Chinese of the Tche-Chwan province still bear the dragon tatoo on theirs, that should prove this historical relationship).

2. When the Lao people had migrated to Muong Then during the Khun Lo period the Chinese continued to call the then Muong Then as "Kao-Long" and the Mekong river at the level of Muong Xieng Hung as "Kiu-Lung-Kiang" as before.

3. In the story book of Thao Hung, Thao Chuong, the country of Khun-Lo was known as Muong Ka-Long (which in fact came from Kao-Long itself). This terminology has been found in an ancient poem which related the conquest by Khun-Lo of Muong Prakan (Xieng Khouang) in Laos today:

Lo, Prince of Princes Ruler of millions of Thens
Conquered and ruled Ka-Long Happily they lived
Together in unity, peace and prosperity.

4. In the story book of Khun Thung, it has been said that Thao Khun Thuong married Nang Ek Khai, the daughter of the King of the Dragons at Nong Ka-se-sen-Gnian and a boy was born to them. His name was Khun Thung and it was this same Khun Thung who built the city of Chien Mai in the north of Thailand today.

From this story book, it was believed that both Khun Thuong and Khun Thung are of Khmer descent and related to Nang Jamadevi who ruled over Muong Hariphouchai (now Lampoon in Thailand) in the year 1008 B.E. At that time the Lao people had already settled down in the principality of Nong Sae. These Lao were the descendents of those known as Long, Lee, Lung, Lwang, thus the word Nang Lwang and the word Lwang means Naga (Lwang is a Lao word and Naga is a Pali word) as found in the Xin-Xai story book:

"Like mad Nang Lwang lost her beauty
Thuong disgusted and beset sent her away."

And in the Vetsantra:

"Blindfolded I shall draw you Lwang
And the flower I shall put on your head."

This shows that the word Lao should have been derived from the word Lwang, Lee or Long as mentioned above.

5. The name of the capital city of the Lao at the time of the Ai-Lao was also Nakorn Lung or Muong Lung which was in the upper north part of the Hwang-Ho river.

6. And just because the Lao people owed their existence to the Lung, Lwang or Long they now still worship the Naga and use the Naga as their national emblem at present.

The meaning of the word "Lao"

The word "Lao" has the following meanings:

1. An American professor, Mr. Clifton Dodd said that the word Lao means big or a tall person, thus leading us to believe that the Lao race is a very large one and has had a great civilization with a high degree of moral virtues in the ancient times.

2. His Highness Thammathira-Rajamahamuni has indicated in his monthly newspaper that the word Lao might have derived from the word Dao which means sky or the highest point because the Lao had the preference for the highland in China to build their homes and considered themselves as highly civilized, drawing their roots from Then Thien, Thai etc... which also mean sky.

3. As far as I am concerned, the word Lao derived from the words Long, Lee, Lung or Lwang and the word Lwang itself could very well become Luang which, in turn, means big or civilized.

In any case, our Lao race had come to existence in the universe at the same time as the Chinese and can be considered on this ground as one of the most ancient races of the world which had known a wide range of splendor and progress no less than any other races of the same era.

Chapter III

The ancient kingdom of the Lao

The ancient Lao people have at first established themselves in the valleys between the rivers Hwang-Ho and Yang-Tse (Yang-tse-Kiang) in the Tche-chwan province of the present Chinese mainland and have built two big cities:

1. The city of Muong Lung near the source of the Hwang-Ho river to the north.
2. The city of Muong Pah south of the Hwang-Ho river but north of Tche-chwan.

Later on, another city known as Muong Ngiao has been built. But of them all, the city of Muong Pah was the biggest and the most important at that time. Other groups of people called the Lao by the name of "Mung". The King of China had sent a goodwill mission to Muong Pah.

Later, in about the year 843 B.C. the Tartars invaded the territory of China and pushed their invasion up to Muong Lung. The people of Muong Lung, sensing the danger fled to Muong Pah and about 79 years later, the Chinese have themselves invaded the Lao cities of Muong Pah and Muong Ngiao. The Lao people fled downward to Muong Kui-Chiu, Kwang-Tung, Kwang Sai and Yunnan in a great number. At this time the Chinese called the Lao the Tai (which later changed to Thai). Nevertheless, the people who remained and fought the Chinese at Muong Pah were successful in beating back the invading Chinese and maintained their independence.

In the year 205 B.E. (338 B.C.) the Lao people at Muong Pah fought another Chinese invasion but were defeated this time and fled the city to join their friends in the south. In the year 297 B.E. (246 B.C.) a Chinese emperor known as Chin-Tse-Hong-Teh who built the huge, 10,000 li long Chinese Wall (one li equals 500 meters) had again invaded the Lao city of Muong Ngiao and again in their defeat the Lao people of Muong Ngiao abandoned the city and fled southward to join the others in the year 328 B.E. (215 B.C.). When all the Lao people were reunited again they built another capital city known as Nakorn Peh-Ngai (1) with Khun Meng or Khun Muong as king. At this time, another Chinese emperor known as Wu-Tee appointed an ambassadorial mission to inquire about Buddhism in India. This Chinese mission wanted to go through Nakorn

Peh-Ngai on their way to India but was refused the passing through by King Khun Meng. Infuriated, Emperor Wu-Tee invaded Nakorn Peh-Ngai. Khun-Meng fought stubbornly to defend his city for several years but capitulated and became vassal to the Chinese in the year 456 B.E. In the year 552 B.E. (9 A.D.) China was the scene of a bloody revolt. Khun Wang who succeeded Khun Meng in Nakorn Peh-Ngai profited of this disturbance in China to proclaim the independence of his kingdom and renounced the vassalage. The independent reign of Khun Wang lasted until the year 593 B.E. (50 A.D.) but was to become dependent of China again when the latter invaded the city.

At this point, the Lao people have split into two main groups:

1. Those who remained in Nakorn Peh-Ngai were called the Ai-Lao.
2. Those who were farther south were called the Ngai-Lao.

In the year 600 B.E. (57A.D.) another Chinese emperor known as Ming-Tee had a strange dream. He dreamed of seeing a large white flash of light shooting up in the sky toward the west. The mandarins of the court predicted that the light the emperor saw in his dream was a sign of the birth of a new religion known as "Fo" which was spreading rapidly throughout India. Taking this prediction for granted, Emperor Ming-Tee appointed an ambassadorial mission which was sent to India with the purpose of collecting as much information as possible about the new religion. After having spent 7 years in India, the mission returned with statues of Buddha, his teaching (Dhamma) and a number of monks (the monk that came with the mission belonged to the Mahayana Sect of Buddhism). Emperor Ming-Tee made this religion the state religion of China and soon after many neighbouring countries had also adopted this new religion from India. At this time, the King of Laos, known as Khun Luang Lee Mau in the captial city of the Ngai-Lao, had also accepted this Mahayana sect of Buddhism in the year 612 B.E.

In the year 621 B.E. (78 A.D.) King Khun Luang Lee Mau died. Prince Khun Lai-Lao succeeded to his father's throne. At this point, the Chinese still considered the Ngai-Lao kingdom as their possessions and sent Chinese administrators and mandarins to supervise the Lao affairs. Khun Lai-Lao refused to accept the Chinese terms and Ngai-Lao was again

invaded by the Chinese and fell. Ngai-Lao again lost its independence and the Lao people was ordered to pay taxes to their Chinese masters. The taxes consisted of two shirts and about 100 pounds of salt per person. Unable to live in such dependence, the Lao again migrated southward every time.

FOOTNOTES

(1)

This city was mentioned in the book dealing with the history of the Thai people as Muong Pah-Nhai and in others it was called Peh-Ngai, Pehh-Ngai, Pah-Nhai or Pah-Nhong; others yet by the name of Muong Pak-Ai, or Poh-Ngai and nowadays the Chinese call it Pu-Eh-Fu.

Chapter IV

The Lao Kingdom of Nong-Sae or Nan-Tchow

Nong Sae is a large lake situated in the east of the Mekong river in the Yunnan province of the present mainland China. The ancient Lao called it Nong Sae or Nong-Ka-Sae-Sen-yan; the Chinese called it Ta-Lee-Fu.

At the time the kingdom of Ngai-Lao was dependent of China, the greater part of the Lao people migrated down to establish themselves along the Nong-Sae Lake. Luckily, at the same time, the Chinese had split into three main groups: The Cho-So, the Lao-Pi and the Sun-Kwan. Owing to this split among the Chinese and especially the dispute and war that had opposed them, the Lao availed themselves of this state of events to build up their unity and strength and had subsequently succeeded in building six new cities, namely:

1. Muong Mong-Sui (could be Muong Sui).
2. Muong Ia-Tse (no such name left nowadays).
3. Muong Lang-Kong (could be Muong Lanc-Kung).
4. Muong Theng-Tsieng (could be Thong-Xang).
5. Muong Tse-Lang (could be Xieng-Lane).
6. Muong Mong-Tse) Muong Sae or Muong Nong-Sae).

Among these six cities, Muong Sae is the capital city of the kingdom. The country was subsequently called the Nong-Sae Kingdom or Nan-Tchow. The frontiers of this kingdom have been recorded in the Chinese history book as including the following areas:

1. The northwest ern borders touched Su-Lu-Fan (Tibet).
2. In the north the borders touched the city of Ngiu-Tchow (China).
3. In the southeastern the borders touched the Kao-Chi country (Vietnam).
4. In the east the borders touched Muong Sun, province of Kwai-Tchow (China).
5. To the west the borders touched the city of Noh-Ka-Toh (Makatha country of India).
6. To the south the borders touched the city of Nui-Wong.
7. To the southwest the borders touched the city of Piu.
8. The northeastern tips touched the city of Chim-Mu.

The Lao who lived in the Nong-Sae independent kingdom

had known a period of tranquility and happiness until about one hundred years later and in 768 B.E. (225 A.D.) Kong-Beng, a capable general of Emperor Lao-Pi of China, invaded again the Nong-Sae Kingdom, the King of Nong-Sae put up a stiff resistance for several years but surrendered at the end and became again vassal to the Chinese emperor. Again, the Lao people lived in oppression and hardship and again they decided to migrate southward as in the past.

In the year 938 B.E. (395 A.D.) the Lao who remained in those six cities were able to regain their lost independence and lived happily until the year 1192 B.E. (649 A.D.) which marked the advent of a new Lao king known as Sihanara (1) or Sinulo (or Siu-Know-Loh according to the Chinese). King Sihanara succeeded in reuniting the six Lao principalities into one unique kingdom and administration, thus making the kingdom of Nong-Sae one of the most prosperous kingdoms of the time. King Sihanara wasted no time in sending a goodwill mission to China whose Emperor Kaw-Chong-Hong-Teh extended it the most cordial reception.

Later, in the year 1228 B.E. (685 A.D.) King Sihanara died and his son, Prince Lo-Seng succeeded to the throne of Nong-Sae. The new king followed his father's step in sending another goodwill mission to China in the year 1233 B.E. (690 A.D.). And to further his kingdom's ties with China, he went over himself to attend the wedding ceremony for the Chinese emperor's daughter, H.R.H. Pu-Sek-Thien.

The advent of Khun Borom Rajathiraj

At the end of the reign of King Lo-Seng, three other Lao kings have successively ruled over the Nong-Sae kingdom before the advent of King Khun Borom Rajathiraj whose name was recorded in the Chinese history book as Pi-Loh-Koh.

Khun Borom Rajathiraj or Pi-Loh-Koh was said to be a very valiant king, well developed and very experienced in the art of warfare. He was in fact the monarch who has added in his successive conquests, a large area of territories of the Nong-Sae kingdom. He was enthroned in the year 1272 B.E. (729 A.D.) and when he reached the age of 32, he sent another goodwill mission to China to renew his friendship with the then Chinese king known as Nguan-Chong-Neng-Hong-Teh who also gave him a heartwarming welcome.