



# LAOS

*its people its society its culture*

*by the*

**Staff and Associates of the  
Human Relations Area Files**

*Editors*

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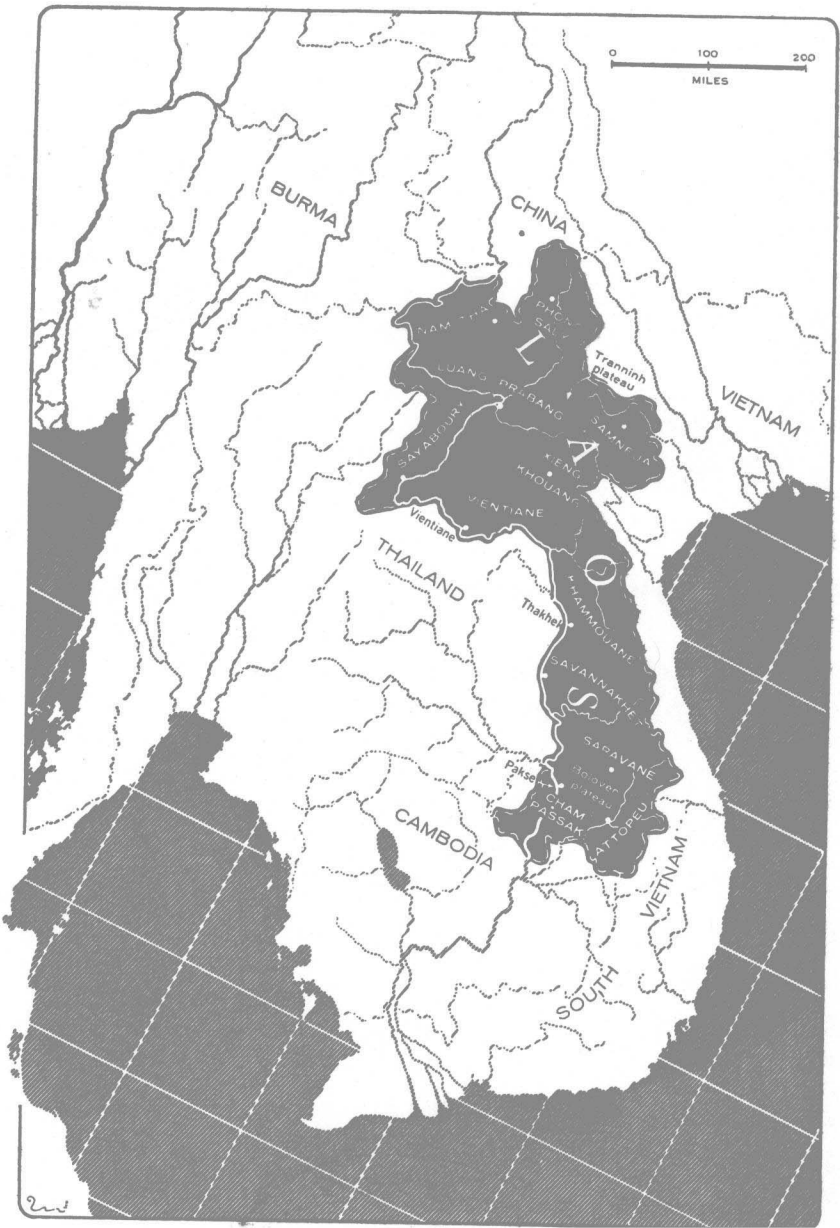
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**SURVEY  
OF  
WORLD  
CULTURES**



**SURVEY OF WORLD CULTURES**



## P R E F A C E

PROBABLY AT NO TIME IN HISTORY have thoughtful men everywhere been so conscious of the need to know about the different peoples of the world. Such knowledge is not in itself a formula for human understanding but it is an indispensable first step. The Survey of World Cultures, of which Laos is the eighth in the series, is one of several means by which the Human Relations Area Files seeks to promote and facilitate the comparative study of human behavior and a greater understanding of cultures other than our own.

These surveys, though augmented by original research, are primarily a collation and synthesis of the best and most authoritative materials, published and unpublished, on the societies selected. For many of these societies excellent specialized studies exist, but the materials are often so widely scattered as to be virtually unavailable to all except the most determined scholar. It was to meet the need for a comprehensive readable volume, bringing together all those aspects of a country and culture usually studied separately, that these books were undertaken.

The present series is based in part on background studies prepared for limited distribution. Under the direction of the Human Relations Area Files an interdisciplinary team with area competence was assembled for each study. The enterprise involved, in all, contributions from several hundred scholars resident at some twenty universities.

The original studies have been extensively revised: materials have been added and the body of the work rewritten, edited, and adapted to a new format. Owing to special requirements imposed on the program, footnotes and citations customary in works of this nature were omitted. Both lack of funds and dispersal of the original teams of scholars have unfortunately made it impossible to supply this critical apparatus. However there are cited in the bibliography at the end of each volume the most important materials on which each study is based.

One result of the process of collecting and selecting information from many, often widely scattered, sources has been to reveal new relationships, making explicit in these surveys much which had remained implicit in previous separate studies. Gaps in existing knowledge have become apparent. The series should, then, raise a number of general questions, at the same time offering certain factual answers and providing guidance for further research. That there will also result increased understanding of the seemingly endless and diverse ways in which men approach the experience of living with one another is the wish of all who have participated in producing this series.

## ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

THE HISTORY OF THE PREPARATION of this study is the history of a research project engaging many persons for longer or shorter periods over the last five years. To thank individually each person who contributed, directly or indirectly, to the realization of the final manuscript would be a formidable task. The acknowledgments here are necessarily limited.

Much of the background material came from a monograph on Laos prepared under contract to HRAF in 1955 at the University of Chicago under the general direction of Professors Norton Ginsburg and Fred Eggan. We gratefully acknowledge our indebtedness to the authors of this monograph: Gerald C. Hickey, who also acted as editor, Albert Androsky, Ann Larimore, Naomi Noble, Hong-phuc Vo, and Mitchell Zadrozny.

The preparation of a second manuscript, differing in scope and form and incorporating additional material, was completed in 1958 at a former Washington branch of HRAF by a team headed by Wendell Blanchard and including Chester A. Bain, Lloyd Burlingham, Russell G. Duff, Bernard B. Fall, Joel M. Halpern, and David J. Steinberg.



Original material for certain chapters in the sociological and political sections of this book was contributed by George L. Trager, Department of Anthropology and Linguistics, University of Buffalo; William Davenport, Department of Anthropology, Yale University; and Sebastian de Grazia, Department of Politics, Princeton University, now with the Twentieth Century Fund.

A preliminary revision and updating of this manuscript for general publication was begun in 1959 by Herbert H. Vreeland III, and Thomas Fitzsimmons, editor of previous volumes in this series. Their suggestions proved helpful in many ways.

Robert B. Textor, Research Fellow in Anthropology and Southeast Asia Studies in Yale University carefully read the chapter on religion in the present volume and in addition offered comments on other chapters in the book. John Musgrave, Head of the Oriental Division in the Yale University Library, contributed expert advice on a number of ethnic and linguistic problems, as did Li Fang-Kuei, Professor of Anthropology in the University of Washington, and William Gedney, Professor of Comparative Literature in State University Teachers College, New Paltz, New York. Wu-chi Liu, Associate Research Director in HRAF, read portions of the manuscript and did an extensive revision of the chapter on art and literature. Arthur N. Young, economist and monetary expert, checked the chapter on the Laotian financial system and made substantive additions to it. John D. Montgomery, currently Research Fellow in the Council on Foreign Relations, Elden Johnson, Assistant Professor of Anthropology in the University of Minnesota, and Raymond Fink of Berkeley, California, all read parts of the manuscript and offered helpful comments and criticisms. Finally, Thephathay Vilaihongs, Permanent Delegate of the Royal Kingdom of Laos to the United Nations very kindly checked several of the chapters and offered his expert advice and criticism. Acknowledgment is hereby made to all these individuals for their very generous assistance.

Special thanks go to Joel M. Halpern, Assistant Professor of Anthropology at the University of California, Los Angeles, who read and commented on many chapters, helped in locating current statistical information, and made contributions to the chapter on public health and welfare. Dr. Halpern freely offered the use of prepublication manuscript materials from his own book, *People of Laos*, to be published by the University of California Press.

Bernard B. Fall, who is Associate Professor of Government in Howard University, very kindly checked the chapters on government and politics and in addition contributed the chapter on

foreign relations. This chapter is largely based on Dr. Fall's article, "International Relations of Laos" which appeared in *Kingdom of Laos*, published in Saigon by *France-Asie* in 1959, with additions and corrections by the author made especially for the present volume.

Standard French transliterations of Lao words have been retained in most instances. The symbol  $x$  indicates a pronunciation somewhat like English *ch*.

Although credit for any contribution this volume may make to an understanding of Laos belongs to many scholars, responsibility for the final form and any shortcomings rests solely with the staff and associates of the Human Relations Area Files and more particularly with the editors, who divided the task, problems of factual content being the special province of Frank LeBar and those of an editorial nature that of Adrienne Suddard.

THE EDITORS

*New Haven, Connecticut*  
*July 1960*

## THE HUMAN RELATIONS AREA FILES

THE HUMAN RELATIONS AREA FILES is a nonprofit research corporation affiliated with Yale University and sponsored and supported by its twenty member organizations. HRAF was established in 1949 "to collect, organize, and distribute information of significance to the natural and social sciences and the humanities." It has concentrated upon furthering a fresh approach to the study of societies, culture, and social behavior.

The Files themselves contain carefully selected sources analyzed according to G. P. Murdock's *Outline of Cultural Materials*. Located at each of the member institutions, they are a new kind of reference library in which basic information about nearly two hundred peoples can be consulted with ease and speed. Preparation of the present study was facilitated by the use of the following Files: Indochina, the Cambodians, the Laotians, the Vietnamese, and Thailand.

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## THE CULTURE AND THE SOCIETY

IN THE CONTINUING COLD WAR between East and West one of the more critical battlegrounds — militarily, economically, and psychologically — is Laos, a small Southeast Asian country strategically located on the periphery of the Communist Chinese colossus. But although millions of dollars in economic assistance from France, the United States, and other countries of the free world are spent annually to strengthen this tropical outpost, few Westerners have any clear picture of the Lao and their culture — fewer still understand the capabilities and probable future of this new and important potential ally.

The independent Kingdom of Laos is less than twenty years old, dating from the signing of an agreement in 1949 with France, which for over half a century had administered Laos as a protectorate. The history of modern Laos may be said to begin with the arrival of the French in 1893, but the Lao people — the dominant ethnic group politically as well as culturally — trace their history back to their flight south from China before the advancing forces of Kublai Khan in the thirteenth century A.D. and the founding of the Lao kingdom of Lan Xang in 1353. By the seventeenth century Lan Xang (Land of a Million Elephants) had reached a political apex and controlled sections of Yunnan, of the southern Shan States, of the Vietnamese and Cambodian mountain plateaus, and large stretches of present-day northeastern Thailand. For the next two centuries Lan Xang went through a slow but continuing decline, dominated by wars, periodic invasions and conquests of Lao territory by the Annamese, Siamese, and Burmese, and division of the kingdom into separate princedoms — Luang Prabang, Vientiane, Xieng Khouang, and Champassak.



The country the French found was, as it is today, almost completely agricultural. Following centuries-old patterns, the overwhelming majority of the people of Laos — as many as 95 percent — are subsistence wet-rice farmers living in tiny villages along the Mekong river and its tributaries or, in the case of the minority hill tribes, dry-rice farmers leading a seminomadic life based on slash-and-burn cultivation in the highlands.

To the villagers, most of whom are illiterate, life is an annual routine of planting, cultivation, and harvest — dictated by the monsoon cycle and punctuated by exuberant village celebration of the numerous religious festivals. In many ways the Buddhist temple in every village is the very center of a villager's life and his concept of the world or even the rest of his own country is often ill-formed.

Sharing basic values and attitudes with the villagers but strongly influenced by their contact with the French and other foreigners are the Laotians living in the towns, particularly the five largest — Luang Prabang, Vientiane, Thakhek, Savannakhet, and Pakse. Here amid surroundings still reminiscent of the village are the evidences of Western influence — air-conditioned movies, bars, night clubs, postal and telephone service, newspapers. In Vientiane, the administrative capital, are the central government offices, the foreign embassies, police headquarters, an airport, the most advanced schools, and the country's only broadcasting station, Radio Vientiane. Luang Prabang, more provincial in atmosphere, is the royal residence, center of Buddhist activities, and social capital.

The wealthier townspeople, mostly merchants and government officials, have been moving rapidly toward a Western standard of living, but the social gap between the urban and rural populations remains much less pronounced than might be expected, one reason being the low level of industrial development.

The most important distinction is between the ruling elite, who usually live in the towns, and the politically apathetic villagers. It was this political elite, comprising a few hundred people from less than twenty historically important families, upon whom the French relied during the protectorate for implementation of colonial policy. Though reserving all real control to a *résident supérieur* appointed by France and using Vietnamese as interpreters and minor functionaries, the French ruled through the king and the local elite wherever possible. The appositeness of this at least nominal recognition of the Lao nobility to the gentle but proud Lao had the effect of encouraging loyalty and cooperation but provided little opportunity for the kind of political experience the Lao