

## **Interview with James Chamberlain<sup>1</sup> conducted by Grant Evans<sup>2</sup> on May 7th, 2001 in Vientiane, Lao PDR**

A: So, can I ask, when you first came to Laos and why you first came; you came as a linguist, didn't you?

B: Actually that's not quite the way it happened. . . I came to avoid the draft actually.  
[Laughter]

A: Ah.

B: Yes. . . In 1965 my name was at the top of the draft list, I had just finished my undergraduate work and at that point there were no options. Everyone was going to Vietnam. And so, I applied to an organization called IVS, International Voluntary Services, and at that point they had . . .

A: That was counted as a kind of military service, or substitute?

B: It could be, yes. It was draft deferrable. If you stayed with them long enough you could, practically speaking, probably go beyond the age at which you would be number one on the draft list. So then after I was here for a year, I got married and that helped even more [laughter] in terms of my status. I still had a draft status up until, you know, I was 27 or something. But it was funny because originally I was planning to go to Africa, and I had studied the Hausa language.

A: Oh really.

B: I was ready to go to Nigeria, and then the Biafran War broke out, so that wasn't really possible or feasible. And, so I applied to IVS to go to Algeria thinking it was just across the desert, but that didn't pan out because they were closing their program in Algeria, and they asked would I like to go to Cambodia, Laos or Vietnam? I knew I didn't want to go to Vietnam, but between Laos and Cambodia, the only country I knew anything about was Cambodia from an art history class. So, I applied to go to Cambodia. That was in 1964

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(when the application process began). And Sihanouk shortly thereafter kicked all the Americans out of Cambodia. So, that left Laos by default. [laughter]. And, that's how I ended up in Laos. But in retrospect it was a very nice thing to have happened.

A: So when you arrived here in '65, what was it like?

B: Actually it wasn't a great deal different than it is right now, you know physically . . . maybe less paint, on the buildings. It was a bit run down, a bit shabby looking, at least to eyes coming from the states, and on our way we had stopped in Japan, in Hong Kong, in Saigon and in Phnom Penh before we finally got to Laos. So, of all those countries Laos was definitely the least attractive physically. But once you got to know it, there were a lot of nooks and crannies to the city that were interesting. It was a very small city. I'm not sure what the population was at that time. It must have been around a hundred thousand or a little over a hundred thousand. I think it was a hundred and fifty thousand in '75 when we left.

A: Right.

B: But it was very diverse as you can imagine. There were lots of countries represented. It was very cosmopolitan and you bumped into everybody because both the Eastern bloc and the Western bloc countries were here. I think every country in the world must have had an embassy in Laos at that time [laughing]. And all these strange political forces, let alone the fact that the Pathet Lao had their embassy right next to the morning market, at the same time there was war going on.

A; Theoretically, that was part of the coalition.

B: Yes, yes. And, then you had the French still very much in evidence with their Mission Militaire. The French influence in the education system was going strong. Both in the Lycée and in the Ministry of Education itself. The French were pretty much in control I would say, of the educational system and also through, of course, the Lao who had studied in France. And then you had this ICC group, you know the International Control Commission, which was Poland, and . . .

A: Poland, India and Canada.

B: Yes [laughing] Poland, India and Canada. And then of course the Americans who were very much in evidence with the big USAID compound, and the Kilometer 6 housing compound, and projects all over the country.

A: Joel Halpern described it as a 'Little America.'

B: Actually it was little America inside that compound and not a lot of Americans really spent a lot of time downtown. I mean, some people did, but it wasn't like the place was crawling with them. I think some people have a wrong opinion about that. In fact, my criticism of the Americans was that they didn't get out.

A: Right. That was Halpern's criticism.

B: They kind of tended to stay near the commissary or near the American school or in their compound, in their house, that sort of thing. But when you got out in the countryside they were more in evidence there because they stuck out [laughs], and you had more Americans working on the ground, for USAID and for various construction projects or education projects and what have you. There was a lot of American influence in the provinces that may have gone unnoticed by people in Vientiane.

A: We really need a good study on American civilian aid at the time, because it seems to me that the one book that's been done by Timothy Castle, *At war in the shadow of Vietnam: US military aid to the Royal Lao government, 1955-1975* (1993) focuses exclusively on military aid.

B: Absolutely. I think that could be done quite nicely right now, because there are still a lot of Americans that have just retired from USAID or the embassy and they're around, their minds are still good, you could really do a nice oral history just from their experiences.

A: So, in a sense, you had a classic split in the expatriate community between those people who'd get into the society and those who were here for the ride.

B: Interestingly, the number of people working with USAID who stayed on was the highest of any country in the world. People stayed on for second, third, or fourth tours, so you had USAID people who'd been here for 13 or 14 years. And their normal tour is only 3 or 4 years.

A: So it provided continuity.

B: A lot. That's why I say these people are quite knowledgeable. And there was a large core like that. Not a small core, a large core of people who had come out. A lot of them, like

myself, from IVS and then joined USAID. I didn't join USAID, but a lot of people did and then went out and just continued to live here because they felt so at home and one of the attractive things for those people (speaking of the cross-over) is in fact, their appreciation of the Lao goodwill and the Lao hospitality that they received. Working with people in Laos was a very nice experience for most people. I don't think anybody in USAID spoke no Lao. I think that everybody that I knew that had been here for more than one term could speak Lao, or at least to some degree. Maybe not perfectly, but a large number of people with Lao language ability. And, so that counted for a lot too, out in the field especially.

A: This has really been underestimated.

B: One of the greatest things that they did was the University of Hawaii project, you know the Fa Ngoum Comprehensive schools. For the first time you had very high level, very well researched and tested textbooks in Lao language, and a huge variety of subjects, and, I don't even know if a complete set survived because a lot of them were burned.

A: The project kicked off in 1967, is that right?

B: They started the project perhaps in that year, but I don't know if there was a school until maybe 1970 or something. But, they had a huge group of people. And all of them experienced educators and they went through the same methodology and textbook development they went through in the states, to make sure it was readable for students at that age level. Which was quite sophisticated and I don't think anybody has done anything like that since.

A: These are particularly aimed at developing secondary Lao education using the Lao language.

B: That's right...

A: What was happening in the past, people were getting to secondary school and having to switch to French.

B: The other aspect of it was it was more a school for the people as opposed to the Lycée system where as you got higher and higher became very elitist in the sense that there were so few seats left at the top that you really had to be at the pinnacle of your group in order to hang in there. But the Fa Ngoum schools opened up the door to more open education for more people. And yet, at the same time maintaining a quality of education, and that has never been duplicated, unfortunately. People talk a lot about, you know, what were the

good things about the old regime and, education you have to say was one of them in terms of what's happened.

A: And if you have an elitist education system and it turns out a good elite that's better than having an elitist education system that turns out a bad elite.

B: [Laughing] That's right . . .

A: Which is roughly what we have at present, I guess. . .

B: Yes, yes. I recall, when was it, 1970 or 71, I spent some time at Khon Kaen University and there were 12 Lao students there, all of whom had a baccalaureate from the Lycée in Vientiane, and they were far and away better educated than the Thai university students. They were students who had been on USAID scholarships, and they were told they were going to the US, but then at the last minute, for budgetary reasons, there was a big cutback about that time, and they were sent to Thailand. And so it was a big blow to their egos for that to have happened. But, they were the best, I would say, in just about every subject area. They came from an environment where they would question the teacher and challenge the professor in the class room and that sort of thing, which of course in Thailand was out of the question.

A: So, actually, the old Lao elite had much more intellectual confidence because they had mastered French intellectualism to a degree and consequently were more confident then vis-a-vis the Thai.

B: Yes I would say at that time there was no feeling of intimidation. It was more or less a symmetrical relationship when one or the other country visited each other. And of course the royal family was part of that, both having a royal family, of archaic lineage was considered to be very uplifting.

A: There were many magazines around at the time too, *Sao Khong*, which was bi-lingual Thai and Lao, *Mithason*, *Pai Nam*, *Nang*... It was all part an intellectual maturity which was . . .

B: There were several others too. I can't remember their names now, that were in a large format. *Phim Lao* was one. Those were very influential and you could pick them up on every street corner. I remember reading a very nice history of the Tai Dam figure *Chau Ngou Hau* in one of them. Did you know there was a Tai Dam association here at that time, that was very active as well, and they had the story of Thao Cheuang in one of the funeral

texts which was the first time I'd ever actually seen it. It doesn't appear in writing for the most part, but does appear in oral history. It was quite nice, things like that. Maha Sila's children of course accounted for a lot of that effort, but they were going in all directions and there was a lot of writing being done. A lot of novels being published, not to mention poetry. It was quite incredible. It obviously had quite a real future ahead of it. The national library was extremely influential in leading some of this. They were publishing things. I mean both the National library and the Lao Academy were publishing. Taking Lao literature, manuscripts, and putting them into printed form. The director general of the national library, Prachit Sourisak, was very active. He had done his undergraduate work in France, and then he had gone to the States for graduate work, and as part of his masters degree he did an internship at the public library, in Flint, Michigan, children's library and he came back loaded with ideas about how to disseminate Lao literature. Among other things there was a group of us that formed in 1974, unfortunately too late.

A: The journal, *Sangkhomkhadi*?

B: Yes that... That was Martin Barber and Amphai Doré, the two of them, but then that was expanded into a group that sought to publish and make available in both languages, dissertations and theses that had been written abroad. There was Yang Dao and myself, and Amphai, Prachit, and who else . . . I think Martin had gone back by that time... maybe 10 people that were interested in this...

A: And, Jacques Lemoine?

B: I don't recall that he was on that particular committee. But, what Jacques did was something else. He and Vo Thu Tinh started, or restarted I should say, the *Bulletin des Amis du Royaume Lao*, and that was very successful. He was also publishing under the name *Vittagnya* many books, such as those of Charles Archaimbault...

A: And, Stephan Feuchtwang on Feng Shui.

B: That's right.

A: Yes, when I first went back and started looking at that period, I became aware that it had just reached a threshold, and it was just going 'boom.'

B: That's right. It all of a sudden exploded...

A: What about the Literature Committee?

B: When I first got there in '65, they were in an old building which is by the Monument [Anousavary], on the opposite side from the old national assembly, where the Ministry of Agriculture is today and the Ministry of Justice. Both the National Library and the Literature Committee, which later became the Royal Academy, were in that building together. The National library was on the 2<sup>nd</sup> floor, but it was mainly in locked rooms, and to actually view the books you had to go and get permission from Prachit. That's how I first met Prachit. I said I'd like to get copies of some Lao literature, and he said, oh you do that downstairs. And downstairs, of course, was the Committee. The man in charge, the Director General, was Soulang Dejvongsa. Maha Sila Viravong had left by then as he had had a falling out with them. Whenever they got into an argument, they (the Lao scholars) would accuse him of being Thai. He had done this dictionary, I guess around 1962. It was published by the Ministry of Education, in the name of the Ministry of Education. But, in fact, everybody acknowledged that it was his personal work.

But, back to the story of acquiring literary things. Practically all of them had been edited by Maha Sila. And of course he also edited this journal called *Vanakadisane*. I got copies of everything they had. Their publication had in fact been supported by The Asia Foundation. They were 300 Kip or 200 Kip, or something. Even in those days it was not expensive. And they had the four volume set of *Sang Sin Xai*, and *Nang Teng One*, and so on. His editorial work has been questioned since by people who have shown that he was rather censorial in his editing. And he would, if there were passages that he thought were too risqué, he would rewrite them himself in the style of whoever it was that was writing.

A: What do you think Peter Koret's argument that someone like Maha Sila sits on a cusp between tradition and modernity?

B: In a way he was still more of a scribe than he was anything else, and then later on he evolved into someone who wished to fix tradition.

A: Perhaps an early version of a nationalistic intellectual?

B: He really was, there's no other word for it. I mean, he did the same thing with historical manuscripts. And of course he also had the advantage of having had access to a lot of the Lao manuscripts in the National Library in Bangkok. That's how he found the *Thao Hung Thao Cheung* manuscript. Because he had already been a monk in Thailand he had access to

those things, which later on were closed off for many years. I remember Prachit telling me he tried to get access to those manuscripts and was told they didn't exist. And, as he was leaving the National Library, a janitor who was from the Northeast of Thailand and who had overheard the conversation with these Thai officials, took him aside and said, 'Let me show you something.' And, he took him into a room to which he had the key for janitorial purposes. And here was a huge room. He said it was more than he could even fathom, all the manuscripts that were taken by the Thai army over the years.

A: You first encountered Maha Sila in the mid-60's?

B: Yes. He was very gracious and very happy that anybody could speak Lao...

A: He didn't speak French or English or anything like that did he? Amongst that group as far as I know...

B: I don't think he spoke French (of course his children did). . .for sure, he didn't speak English or didn't speak very much of it...

A: And you met Pierre Nginn at that time?

B: Yes, Pierre Nginn was already very old at that time. And, and he was very French in his outlook and everything he did he compared to France [laughs]. If it was something about Lao literature, it was just like Chason de Roland or, just like this or just like that. He had his whole basis for locating Laos in the world vis-a-vis France.

A: He's a rather interesting figure in his own right, however.

B: Yes, well he was really responsible for getting a lot off the ground. The Literature Committee, and I think he was the first president or chairman at the time.

A: Yeah, that's right. And then, did you meet Phouvong Phimmasone?

B: Oh yes. Later on he became quite influential.

A: He became the head of it in 1973, didn't he?

B: Yes. He was very influential. He was the reaction to Maha Sila in many respects. He was the Lao answer to Maha Sila, in their eyes. But I don't think he had quite the depth of Maha Sila in many ways.

A: Because he wrote one of the first major studies in French of Lao literature.

B: Yes, yes.

A: Which was in 1948.

B: Yes.



A: He was a lawyer too.

B: In '71, or '72 they started doing a large dictionary but it actually didn't get off the ground until '73. Soulang had masterminded the whole thing. There were 25 members of that committee, and they were all over 50 and most of them over 60, and so they started off trying to do this, using Maha Sila's dictionary as the basis and then adding to it, and unfortunately, because there were 25 of them and they were all patient Lao characters, they didn't even finish through *Ko* — you know the first letter of the alphabet after one year, and meeting once a week.

A: Enjoying themselves.

B: It was such a pleasure, the aesthetic experience of it I'm sure, and so finally at that point, Soulang came to us at the Asia Foundation and asked for funding to continue this project. They'd run out of funding. And, he explained to me what had happened. And I said, well how are you going to get around this. He said well I'm going to have a stopwatch. And they set up a rule, because they had to agree that the objective was actually to finish the dictionary, and he was there with his stopwatch. Actually, I think that started in late '72. Nobody was allowed to talk for more than 3 minutes at a time. And Soulang's duty was to time everyone when they spoke and to be very firm about it. And he had that capability. He could do that. And so, they finished it. Just about the time things were falling apart in 1975, this dictionary was finished.

A: They did finish it!

B: Yes, that's why I say it was such a loss. And it was in a manuscript form. It took about two and a half years. But that was before the days of Xerox. You couldn't very readily get a Xerox copy of anything. And, so there was one copy. One typescript and it was in Soulang's desk. And he even told me that he stopped by there when he was about ready to escape and go to Thailand and to France. He stopped by the office to pick up that dictionary and it was locked. His drawer was locked and he didn't have the key. So he had to leave it.

A: You've got no idea what happened to it?

B: I later asked people about it. I remember asking Dara about it, she's Maha Sila's daughter, and she hadn't even known about it. I asked Soulang about this new Lao to Lao dictionary that came out in 1992.

A: Sponsored by the Toyota foundation.

B: Was that who it was? I don't remember. Yes. It wasn't a great printing job or anything, but it was quite a nice dictionary in many respects and I asked Soulang if this maybe wasn't that dictionary either slightly reworked or not reworked at all. Lots of other people's names are on it now. And he said he thought it was. From what he could remember, he thought that it was. So, somebody may have kept it...you know given the state of things today. It's too bad. I mean, there's a lot lexical work that could be done using that dictionary and using other dictionaries that have been published over the years, both French and English. It's one of the better, for strange reasons, it's one of the better lexicalized languages in Southeast Asia, because you've got the Reinhorn dictionary, you've got the old Guingard dictionary, you've got the dictionary that Kerr, an American, did, and other things like that. You know, put those all together, plus these two Lao dictionaries, the Maha Sila one and this one, and then if you took Maha Preecha's dictionary of Isan, you could have quite a nice dictionary. Prior to 1975 there was an enabling environment as they say. There were lexicons that were being developed simultaneously with the dictionary. They had committees for all different subject matter, geography, biology, etc. The problem, interestingly enough, speaking of the intellectual state of things, the problem was the proliferation, because of all the different foreign influences in the education system. You know, in the last 5 years of the old regime you had the German Technical School, you had the American Comprehensive School, the Fa Ngoum School, the French technical schools, in addition to the university and the Law school and so on. And they were all developing, coining, technical vocabulary [laughs] but separately. So the idea of this . . . of this committee was not to develop new words, but to decide about which one from the many would be the standard one for Lao, in order for physics teachers, for example, in these various schools to talk to each other about physics. I sat in on some of the first ones that were done. . .

A: This was the Royal Academy, wasn't it?

B: Yes, that was it. Which had a more national language development side to it that hadn't been there before. This was also supported by The Asia Foundation.

A: But also, they also started to produce, like in Thailand, a little bulletin on natural sciences.

The idea of the Royal Academy was to sort of bring all these things together.

B: They had a galley of people there, just copying manuscripts. You could go into the Royal Academy and you'd see peoples sitting at desks just doing nothing but working on *bai laan* manuscripts, just transcribing them.

A: That was a high priority.

B: Oh yes. And, Prachit was doing it also. In fact, it was a very interesting situation, and I don't know if I mentioned to you before the case of the Tai Lue history. During our work in the Northwestern part of Laos, what is now Bokeo, it used to be Houa Khong, we discovered that there were 4 extant manuscripts of the Lue people themselves. They were big *bai laan* manuscripts, and they were written in the Lue language, which is very similar to Tham, and one in Laos was at Muang Moeng, just North of what is now Huay Sai, a couple of districts up, right on the river. But it's in from the river, the city itself is in from the river. And, there was a USAID man there in the early '60's, his name was Ernie Kuhn. Anyway, Ernie Kuhn was the area coordinator for USAID there, and he had an interest, just a personal interest in these kind of things, and when he was in Muang Moeng he found this manuscript, and he paid somebody there to make a copy for him, and after they had made the copy. He was about ready to take it and they said, can we have the new copy and you take the old one. You know, typical [laughing]. 'Cause the new is better than the old, right? [laughs] So, he said, well, if you insist. But he was very good about it. But before he left, he had them read the entire manuscripts into a reel to reel tape recorder. And so, he was able to preserve this manuscript. He gave it to the National library. It was there for a while, but then all of a sudden the Minister of the Interior at that time, his name was Pheng Phongsavanh came and took it. Just unilaterally took it back and then gave it to his son, who was at the time the Chao Muang of Houay Sai. After which it disappeared. And that was before Prachit Sourisak ever had a chance to get it copied.

A. Maybe it ended up in Thailand?

B: In some cases this happens. There are unscrupulous academics nosing around and paying people to go across the river and get a manuscript from that temple or this temple. And with a little donation to the temple they're very happy, because the monks rarely read these manuscripts anymore. These academics later keep them hidden away in their own private collections and won't reveal their existence to the outside world. That seems to be what happens a lot. Which is kind of sad.

A: Back to the cultural situation before '75, what about popular music?

B: Popular music. Wow. You know you didn't hear Thai songs all that much. You heard them along with everything else, but I remember at the Settha Palace Hotel back in about 1973-74 you could go at noontime and sit around this big dining room there, what is now I guess the lobby. And they had singers for 2 hours every noon. It was great place for everybody to go, all the yuppies of Vientiane at the time would go there. But, what amazed me, I recall sitting there one time and a girl sang songs in eight languages. You know, she'd sing a song in Chinese, the next one would be in Vietnamese, and the next one would be in Lao. And there'd be one in Thai, then one in French, one in English. It just kept going on and on. A single performer was expected to have that kind of repertoire.

A: In the early 60's it's still a fairly sleepy place?

B: Yes.

A: As you move towards the war things start to spin out of control, in the late sixties.

B: Uh-huh.

A: In a sense the Lao, lose complete control of what's happening, because it's a Vietnamese and American war by that stage.

B: Yes, but you know, you didn't notice that in Vientiane. You could be in Laos and never know that there was a war going on, especially if you stayed just in Vientiane.

A: Except for the refugee movements that started in the late 60's, early 70's.

B: Yes, but there weren't many refugees in Vientiane. I mean, not noticeably.

A: On the outskirts of Vientiane?

B: I suppose if you were living on the outskirts of town you'd notice it, but living in Vientiane you didn't notice it. I mean I knew it was going on because I was working at the Ministry of Social Welfare where they had a resettlement office. But you know most of them were not right on the edge of Vientiane. Most of them were 30 kilometers out, so you didn't see a huge influx of people coming into town. You knew there was a war. . .there were lots of reporters staying at the Constellation, you know, things like that. The night spots were . . .when I first got here in '65 Dong Palane was the big night strip with brothels and bars and one dancing place, the El Morocco [laughs] and everybody went there to dance at the El Morocco. And later on it shifted over to the Settha Palace, a place called Le Spot, 'The Spot,'

run by a Corsican. And then, after that, that was going on for a couple years, then it moved back to the old El Morocco, but it had another name, I can't remember. And. . .Up until the end it was there.

A: I read a report done by 2 Canadian anthropologists, who did a study of prostitution in Vientiane in the early '70's. They came up with a figure of about 1000 prostitutes, and my impression from reading that report was that it was actually a small number of people.

B: Take the White Rose, right. Those girls were mainly from Northeastern Thailand. But down in Dong Palane they were mainly Vietnamese and Chinese girls. And very beautiful, very nice girls. There was only one place, that was right on the river, I can't remember the name of it. It was run by an Italian that actually had anything that you would call go-go. And that wasn't established until about '73 or '74. Other than that, there was no such thing. It didn't exist in Vientiane. You'd go in and you would sit down and you would have a drink. And you'd chat with the girls as long as you felt comfortable, and you either left or took the girl upstairs afterwards. There was an upstairs in every place. That was the main set up every place you went. The only exception was another dancing place further down on the river, and that place was really wild. That was a big dancing place, with girls and also an upstairs. Every dancing place had to have an upstairs except for the El Morocco, which was where most of the foreigners went. But this was much more of a Lao place. And you found that same plan also in Luang Prabang. I remember going up there in late '60's and there was a strange place...sort of barn like with a band not right in tune and . . .playing little bits of everything. It's so dark you can hardly see your hand in front of your face. So, there was...that was a style that was emerging I would say. But the old style was simply, the girls and the bar and the drinks and the upstairs room.

A: So, the upstairs room has sort of disappeared today?

B: Yes. Exactly. It's not quite so overt. You don't have these kinds of blue collar brothels that you have in Thailand. I don't think you really have that I don't think you've ever had it. It may emerge now with the new transportation routes.

A: What's happening now is that Lao girls are going to Pattaya, etc.

B: That's a new thing. That whole thing is brand new. There's both migration and trafficking actually at this point. I've been helping the people at Social Welfare design a new trafficking department. And, I helped them design some research. The initial findings are

quite interesting. The girls that are going from the villages that they visited in Xaygnaboury were doing quite well. They were bringing back lots of money and building new houses in their village and it was very well handled. And I think the secret is that they had people on the Thai side that were looking after them after they crossed the border. But the other set of villages were in Saravanh, from further inland, they didn't have the connections in Thailand. They were lured. Once they got in Thailand it was just like trading buffalo. And so, they had not had good experiences, and most of them came back with no money at all, nothing to show for all their efforts, and had been virtually slaves in Bangkok and other places. No, in the old days you'd never. . . nobody ever heard of something like that.

A: Back to pre-75 things again. That era . . .that intelligentsia, there was in fact a small Hmong intelligentsia, wasn't there?

B: Absolutely, yes.

A: You mentioned Yang Dao. But if you go back earlier than that you had Touby Lyfoung and his brothers.

B: Touby and Tou JEU, the man who was the head of the Lao supreme court. There was a big outcry when he became head of the Supreme Court in Laos. Because he was Hmong and that was very hard for the Lao to swallow. But he had the education, and was actually a very good person. And very practical, I remember he and Bill McDougal from The Asia Foundation were always trying to perfect the bamboo technology for a water-wheel driven rice pounder, and such things.

A: Tou JEU was on the King's Council at one point, around 1949.

B: I wouldn't be surprised. Yes.

A: Then Touby followed later.

B: That's right. And, I think it happened pretty much independent of the war. The French missionaries had educated them well, sent them to France in many cases, and they came back to become representatives in the National Assembly. This was apart from the military side where you had generals and Hmong who had gone through the officers' training school. They weren't just SGU, American hired people who'd been given a rank, they actually had worked from the bottom up. Like you say, there was a real Hmong intelligentsia. One of the first things I did with IVS actually was to give English entrance exams to Hmong in Sam Thong, you know, with Pop Buell cheering along. [laughs] And boy,

did I ever get earfuls from him. He really wanted his boys to get into school. And a lot of them did. I think there were about 40 Hmong in the teacher training college at Dong Dok, and there were also a fair number in the law school. And they were quite vocal, especially about the language issue. This became a very hot issue, you know. They'd write letters and things to the editor. And, they really . . . it was interesting, because what had happened, . . . there had always been, since the forties, a Romanized alphabet, the so-called Barney-Smalley alphabet that Father Bertrais had used, and this was already very well known among the Catholic Hmong. They wanted to publish some new primers and they had them already to go in the Romanized alphabet. And then they made the mistake, this was in 1967, I think, they made the mistake of asking permission from the Ministry of Education. If they hadn't asked permission this never would have been an issue. And the ministry said 'No, we can only do it in Lao' because there'd been the National education reform act in 1962 which specifically said that there shall be education for all people of Laos, all the minority people of Laos, in their own language, so long as they used the Lao script. And they were, of course, interpreting language to mean writing system. That was actually the work of a French advisor, Jacques Bousquet was his name. . . he was a real nice guy. . . He had returned later with UNESCO...at any rate...they interpreted that quite literally, when they asked for permission. The Ministry said, you can only do it if you use the Lao alphabet, so they had to go back to the drawing board and design a Lao alphabet. Smalley and other people were brought in to do this, and they designed the Lao-Hmong alphabet, which was really just a symbol-for-symbol transliteration of the English one, or the Roman one. But anyway, they did that and published a 2 volume set of primers, and it was immediately used. The Bible was translated. There was a big Protestant movement. It turned out, interestingly enough, most of the Protestants were Green Hmong and most of the Catholics were White Hmong, not exclusively, but as a generalization. And, of course, the ones who had come to Vientiane, for education and were in the educational system, or were in the government system were all white Hmong. And so, these students at the law school were quite outraged when the government then said, 'Well, from now on, all minority languages must be written in the Lao script.' They wanted an exception, 'except for Hmong language.' They wanted that sentence added into the decree, because they argued, I think quite reasonably, that this Romanization had been around since the 1940's and lots of people

knew it, and it was already functional. As far as I know, nobody ever had a strong reaction to it on the government side. But Hmong students kept writing about it in the newspapers, time after time. The interesting thing is, there was never any problem with using the spoken minority language in the classroom. As long as you used the Lao writing system, that was the only thing that they were concerned about. When Yang Dao came back that was a big boost to all the Hmong, and they put him in the Ministry of Plan. So at all of the high society get-togethers of Vientiane at that time you always had Touby and Yang Dao and Tou Jeu and couple of other prominent Hmong there.

A: You were saying that there was also an active Black Tai group.

B: Yes. Very active. There was a man here who's name was Kam Ouynh who was the Black Tai leader. And, his father in-law, Baccam Quy was very old in those days, I mean he was already in his 80s. Kam Ouynh actually did all of the political work on behalf of the Tai Dam most of whom had come to Laos after the French defeat at Dien Bien Phu. They were a very unified group and they lived together in large communities, such as Nong Boua Thong in Vientiane.

A: And these people cleared out after '75?

B: They were the first ones across the river. They said, we've seen this before, and they just left everything. They had very nice houses. Most of the aristocracy, as you know, were from Muang Mouay and they were all the Baccam lineage. The women always dressed in Black Tai clothing wherever they went. They would preserve that tradition very, very strongly. And, they always spoke Tai Dam and they had the rituals and the funerals and everything carried out according to tradition. I think it's because you had the aristocracy here that knew what the tradition should be, so they preserved it.

A: And they had a French speaking elite.

B: Very much so. And Baccam Ouynh was one of those of course. They also had a military presence. You know they had an SGU unit that was, I think at Phon Hong. None of them had Lao citizenship, even up until, into the early 70's. So Cam Ouynh finally, I think it was in '73 or '74, finally got citizenship for all those members of the Black Tai community that had come after the fall of Dien Bien Phu. And one of the things he used to argue his case with the Prime Minister Souvannaphouma was the fact that they'd been fighting as a Black Tai guerilla force with the RLG. But you also had Black Tai people in various positions. In high



ranking or fairly high ranking positions around town. Quite often in the private sector as well, interestingly enough.

A: If you look at 70-75 and the Coalition Government what was your reading of how people understood what was happening?

B: Everybody was so happy that peace was coming. I mean they didn't look at in terms of anything else, except that the fighting was going to stop. They didn't understand the ins and outs of the 18 point agreement and all that. But they understood the idea that now the war is going stop. And when Souphanouvong came I happened to be standing in front of the Apollo Hotel when he first arrived and, ahh the throngs of people lining the streets, and he had the window down and he was waving. He was the symbol that peace was now here. He had arrived.

A: Souphanouvong in retrospect, it's absolutely clear that he was vital to the PL success. People believed him when he said nothing would change, except the foreigners would go home. So the RLG side put down their guns and went off to the camps. Souphanouvong said they'd only be away for 2 months.

B: They believed him. Yes, everybody.

A: You were talking about regional accents . . .

B: Accents...

A: Because I was talking to a Lao friend, the other day as we were listening to Lao radio, and the announcer was a person from Savannakhet.

B: Oh yes.

A: Speaking with a southern accent... and she was saying 'ahhh, listen to these accents. Why aren't they speaking the standard accent.'

B: Oh really?

A: But I was just wondering, what's your assessment of things...how do people relate to accent? B: Oh right.

A: I mean you talk to Lao overseas, particularly from Luang Phrabang, and given that the royal family spoke with a Luang Phrabang accent, they're very conscious of maintaining that particular accent.

B: Essentially, I would say that people in Laos don't change their style of speaking to conform to any standard. There's a very beginning of this starting now in Vientiane. But, it's not going to come easily because there's not a lot of . . . I mean somebody speaks with a Savannakhet accent, they say, oh right, he's from Savannakhet. But, it's not like they're holding it against him or anything like that.

A: Right.

B: And the same with the people from Pakse. You know, their strange tone where you can't pick up the final consonants. Or, certainly not Luang Phrabang. Luang Phrabang is not going to change. And if anything, Luang Prabang is considered to be, by many people, the flowery kind of language. But I don't think you ever find anybody in Vientiane trying to imitate for social purposes, the Luang Prabang accent. For the longest time there was no stigma attached to anybody's accent. They just accepted it as, ..that's the way it is. And it wasn't until after '75 when all these 'hicks' from Xam Neua started coming into Vientiane that there was any kind of feeling that there were lower classes of people coming to town.

A: Perhaps they are learning this idea of a standard from Thai TV?

B: Everything is standard Thai, right.

A: Back before 75 there wasn't television.

B: No, that's right.

A: The media wasn't very highly developed at all. What you're getting now in the 1990's is this proliferation of mass media.

B: It may be happening unconsciously, but it's not happening consciously as far as I know. I mean I haven't picked up any inklings that it has. And you'd think. . .there's an amazing resilience still. And the fact that I enjoy and watch Thai TV all day long doesn't mean that I'm going to be Thai. The Isan people, however, are really between a rock and a hard place, because they're not Thai and they're not Lao. They used to be, before all of this took place, they used to be more Lao. In fact, I think the Lao sometimes look down on the Isan people because the way they speak Lao is still what the Lao consider to be very folksy.

A: You went to University of Michigan, didn't you.

B: I was very fortunate, I went to Michigan. Michigan had a lot of good people for Southeast Asia. It had Gedney, and it had Robins Bruling, and it had Pete Becker, it had Carl Hutterer,

it had Pete Gosling and John Whitmore, and so on. It had a lot of really top notch Southeast Asian specialists, and so I was very fortunate. But, there wasn't much after that. I couldn't envision going into academia. There's so much to do here. I mean, there's so much to do when you're out here, even doing it in your spare time, which is what I do. I'm sure I can publish and . . . certainly research and study as much this way as I ever could have done in a university, where you have to go to faculty meetings and . . .[laughs] get involved . . . Gedney was quite angry at me, as you probably saw from some of the Ram Khamhaeng writings.<sup>3</sup> But we made our peace in the end. And then sadly he passed away.

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<sup>3</sup> See James R. Chamberlain, ed., *The Ram Khamhaeng Controversy: Collected Papers*, (Bangkok: Siam Society, 1991).