

January 1958

# Trade Patterns in Northern Laos

Joel Halpern

*University of Massachusetts, Amherst*, [jmhalpern@anthro.umass.edu](mailto:jmhalpern@anthro.umass.edu)

Follow this and additional works at: [https://scholarworks.umass.edu/anthro\\_faculty\\_pubs](https://scholarworks.umass.edu/anthro_faculty_pubs)



Part of the [Anthropology Commons](#)

---

## Recommended Citation

Halpern, Joel, "Trade Patterns in Northern Laos" (1958). *The Eastern Anthropologist*. 67.  
[https://scholarworks.umass.edu/anthro\\_faculty\\_pubs/67](https://scholarworks.umass.edu/anthro_faculty_pubs/67)

This Article is brought to you for free and open access by the Anthropology at ScholarWorks@UMass Amherst. It has been accepted for inclusion in Anthropology Department Faculty Publication Series by an authorized administrator of ScholarWorks@UMass Amherst. For more information, please contact [scholarworks@library.umass.edu](mailto:scholarworks@library.umass.edu).

# THE EASTERN ANTHROPOLOGIST

(Quarterly Journal Published by the Ethnographic and  
Folk Culture Society, U. P.)

Vol. XII, No. 2 ]

[ December 1958—February, 1959 ]

## CONTENTS

	PAGE
A Study of Matrimonial Advertisements in North India ... ..	73
... .. <i>Arthur Niehoff</i>	
The Secular Status of Castes ... ..	87
... .. <i>Jyotirmoyee Sarma</i>	
The Custom of Polyandry as practised in Travancore ... ..	107
... .. <i>C. M. Abraham</i>	
Trade Patterns in Northern Laos ... ..	119
... .. <i>Joel Martin Halpern</i>	
OBITUARY : (Robert Redfield) ... ..	125
RESEARCH NEWS AND VIEWS : ... ..	127
BOOK REVIEWS :	
Citadel Market and Altar— <i>by Spencer Heath</i> ... ..	131
... .. <i>G. Bhatt</i>	
Land, Man and Culture in South East Asia — <i>by William L. Thomas, Jr.</i> ... ..	134
... .. <i>A. R. Tewari</i>	
Indian Health in Arizona— <i>by</i> <i>Bartram S. Kraus</i> ... ..	135
... .. <i>R. P. Srivastava</i>	
Tribal Economy— <i>by D. S. Nay</i> ... ..	137
... .. <i>K. S. M.</i>	
The Dublas of Gujarat— <i>by P. G. Shah</i> ... ..	138
... .. <i>E. T.</i>	
Sinhalese Village— <i>by Bryce Ryan</i> ... ..	139
... .. <i>E. T.</i>	

**Editor : D. N. Majumdar**

**Foreign Editor : C. Von Fürer - Haimendorf**

**Published by the Ethnographic and Folk Culture Society, U. P.,**

Department of Anthropology, Lucknow University,  
Lucknow. (India)

## TRADE PATTERNS IN NORTHERN LAOS

JOEL MARTIN HALPERN

Since the author has lived in Laos for less than a year, this paper is more a general survey than an analysis in depth. If anything, it should emphasize the large gaps existing in our knowledge of this area, from the point of view of economic, social and cultural anthropology. As is the case with countless other societies throughout the world, the people of Laos are going through a period of change. Culture change is, of course, an ever-present phenomenon, but few will doubt that its rate has increased greatly in recent years—as an outgrowth of closer contacts among peoples, directly and indirectly resulting from wars and the aspirations of new nations as well as by planned development and aid programs. In northern Laos there are a number of different peoples whose positions range from that of an almost entirely subsistence economy to that based primarily on barter and cash trade. It is the trade relations and economic interdependencies among these peoples which I wish to present here.

First, it may be well to give the basic geographic and ethnographic facts of the situation. Although northern Laos, arbitrarily defined in this paper as the area north of the administrative capital of Vientiane, consists of some six of the twelve provinces in the Kingdom, the present discussion is mainly with direct reference to the province of Luang Prabang, where most of the author's field experience has been concentrated. Nevertheless, most of the following comments apply to neighboring provinces as well.

Two of the most salient characteristics of northern Laos are immediately visible to the airborne traveller: a mountainous terrain and very sparse and scattered settlements. If the plane happens to be following the winding course of the Mekong, the chief communication artery of Laos and main river of Indochina, he will see settlements clustered along the embankments. Veering away from the river, he will spot houses right on mountain tops and on rugged slopes as well as in valleys. He is seeing a textbook example of ethnic stratification based on varying geographical adaptations.

In the valleys along the Mekong and its tributaries dwell the Lao, the dominant group politically, economically and socially. They are Buddhists, and their linguistic, religious and other cultural affiliations are with the Lao of northern Thailand. In villages and in the few small towns, bamboo and thatch houses on stilts are the characteristic Lao homes. Paddy rice of the glutinous variety, the Lao food staple, is the principal crop, supplemented by small vegetable gardens and the

keeping of chickens and some pigs. For the majority who live along the rivers there is also fishing. Except in time of extreme drought, the Lao easily produce enough to feed themselves. Most Lao are largely self-sufficient and are not motivated to produce surpluses for market. An exception is in the case of fresh produce for Luang Prabang town, the royal capital of Laos and largest town in the north, and, to a much lesser extent, for some of the other smaller towns in northern Laos. It should be mentioned, however, that in these areas the commercial activities are almost exclusively in the hands of Chinese and Vietnamese merchants. There are also some itinerant Cambodian cloth merchants.

Inhabiting mountain slopes above the Lao are the Khamu. (The Lao call them Kha, or slave, although recently the term Lao Teng—Lao of the Mountains—has been considered more acceptable, whereas in their own language Khamu means "We the people"). They are the aboriginal people of Laos and are, on the whole, darker skinned and of shorter stature than the Lao. Their economy emphasizes slash-and-burn agriculture and the gathering of forest products. Many have tended to become Laotianized, and their way of life has lost much of its former distinctiveness, although the Khamu language is quite separate, being a member of the Indonesian family. This lack of cultural integration may be one of the reasons why Protestant missionaries in northern Laos have succeeded in making converts from among the Khamu.

The third group, those who live on the tops of mountains, are the Meo. Their scattered settlements are small, consisting of two or three to a dozen plank houses built directly on the ground. The majority of Meo in Luang Prabang province are from neighboring Xieng Khouang. The Meo are relatively recent arrivals in Laos, having migrated from China within the last hundred years or so. Their religion is a type of shamanism, and their linguistic ties are with the tribes to the north in Yunnan and to the northwest in Thailand and Burma. Crops are raised exclusively by slash-and-burn, new fields being cleared on the faces of the mountains each year. The chief cash crop is opium. Both glutinous and non-glutinous rice, plus corn and some vegetables are raised. Meo livestock includes small horses used for transport over the steep mountain trails. A unique feature of the Meo is their dress. Men wear black trousers and a short open jacket, with bright red sash around the waist. Depending upon the sub-group to which they belong, women wear either similar trousers, with a long colorful apron in front, or a short, pleated skirt adorned with indigo-dyed *batik* designs. Almost all the fabric used for their clothing is obtained through trade, much of it being manufactured fabric. Both sexes wear large silver collars, often several of them, depending upon the wealth of the family.

A most interesting feature of trade in northern Laos is the institution of *lam* (this term designates the institution as well as the individual carrying out the functions of Lam). A person acts as intermediary between traders and the government on the one hand, and the tribal peoples—usually the Khamu and sometimes the Meo—on the other. The Lam himself is a Lao, most often inhabiting a village that has relatively good access to markets. He is frequently a village or district headman.

Traditionally the Khamu came to him whenever they had some forest products to sell or wanted to buy salt or clothing. Then the Lam would arrange the trade with a merchant, although he himself sometimes engaged in commerce directly with the tribal peoples. Lam is distinctly a reciprocal relationship: head taxes levied by the French were often paid for by the Lam, and in return the Khamu worked in the fields of their Lam, when necessary and supplied him with game and forest products he might need. In those cases where the Lam was also their merchant he enjoyed a complete monopoly, with all their trade funneled through him. The relationship between a Lam and the Khamu was not formalized and depended largely on individual personalities. Thus a man might be the Lam for a few tribal families or for entire villages. He might be the Lam to these people by inheriting the position from his father; or, if the Khamu found that he was dishonest in his dealings, they could seek another.

Today the institution of Lam has begun to disintegrate to a certain extent. Most Meo no longer use it, since many Meo men now speak a little Lao and are capable of handling their own affairs. [Lam was never of primary importance among the Meo since much of their opium trade was traditionally carried on directly with the Hó (Lao name for Yunnanese) who traveled in horse caravans throughout northern Laos.]

Some Khamu, too, are beginning to speak Lao and to learn how to transport and market goods for themselves. They are legally regarded as equals to the lowland Lao under the present Lao constitution, and their feelings of inferiority have somewhat lessened. Also, significant numbers of Khamu have moved from the mountainsides down to the valleys and have begun to adopt aspects of Lao culture. In most cases there has not been much conflict with the Lao, since even the valley areas are usually underpopulated.

The institution of Lam has, however, far from disappeared. Even today a French merchant obtains benzoin and stic-lac through a Lam and not directly from the Khamu gatherers themselves. This is no doubt due to the fact that most of the benzoin is obtained from rather remote forest areas and must be painstakingly collected in small amounts over a long period of time. According to reports,

the traditional pattern of Lam exists almost unchanged in the province of Phong Saly.

In northern Laos there are three means of transporting trade goods. The most important are by Lao dugout (*piroque*), often with motor, and by antiquated river barge on the Mekong. Small commercial airplanes carry goods north from Vientiane and link the small towns in the north with the town of Luang Prabang. In the dry season, when the 400 kilometer road between the administrative and royal capitals is open, jeeps and trucks connect villages along the route. Thus, in previously isolated areas there are now Lao settlements with landing fields, as well as villages along the river or the road which serve as trading centers for the mountain peoples. In fact, in some cases entire Lao villages have shifted their sites to the roadside in order to set up shops.

In contrast to the towns, the usual pattern in these Lao trading villages is for business to be in the hands of a few Lao part-time merchants. This is a convenient arrangement, as they are able to tend their crops in the rainy season, when trade is reduced. Very little capital is necessary to open a shop—and the store itself is more often than not simply the threshold of the owner's house, heaped with a few bolts of manufactured black cotton broadcloth to sell to the Meo, some locally-woven blue-black indigo homespun for trade with the Khamu, a row of flashlight batteries, a few bars of soap, a basket of nails. In addition to these village shops there are other Lao merchants who obtain a small stock of goods in Luang Prabang and during the dry season go directly to the upland tribal villages.

Both the Meo and the Khamu supply the Lao middlemen with a variety of vegetables and forest products in return for manufactured or semifinished goods. For example, in exchange for their opium the Meo obtain cloth, salt and iron bars which their smiths forge into tools. A not insignificant amount of the product is consumed by the cultivators themselves, however.

Some small Meo settlements about 35 kilometers from Luang Prabang have begun to market certain fresh produce for which there is a ready market in town. Another important trade item of both Meo and Khamu is charcoal, consumed in large quantities, since it provides the fuel for the power station of the royal capital. This type of trade has become sufficiently significant to some Meo to have caused them to shift their settlements to mountaintops closer to town. As a result of both increased contact and increased cash, occasional Meo homes afford luxuries such as kerosene and even powdered coffee.

Of great importance to the Meo is their silver currency, in the form of small ingots as well as the heavy neck collars and bracelets. Even today most Meo refuse to accept paper money, and old Burmese and

Chinese coins are melted down in Luang Prabang and fashioned into bars specifically for trade with the Meo.

Opium is still unquestionably of vital importance to Meo economy (and for this reason the Lao government has not formally banned local trade in it); yet now-a-days Meo purchases may just as likely have been paid for with a load of potatoes or charcoal. Some Meo have been taking unusual initiative in the marketing of their produce: recently one group, dissatisfied with the prices they were getting for their potatoes from a Vietnamese middleman in Luang Prabang, rented space on a river barge and took about a ton of potatoes down the Mekong to the capital to sell. When the produce was marketed they made the return trip to Luang Prabang by plane.

Trade relations between the Khamu and the Lao are closer and more direct than those of the Meo and the Lao. This is due to their greater accessibility, their traditional dependence upon the Lao for transporting and marketing and their lack of a high yield cash crop. The chief trade items of the Khamu are forest products, wild game and often rice (although sometimes they have to buy rice from the Lao when their own crops fail). Woven bamboo sleeping mats, low bamboo stools and a variety of basketry used in all Lao homes are almost exclusively a Khamu craft. It is the Khamu who supply the neat packets of banana leaves, used for wrapping food at market. In the Luang Prabang area betel nut and the special leaves to wrap it in for chewing is a significant trade item so much so that it has promoted stability in certain villages which, because of easy access to this commodity, are reluctant to follow the usual pattern of shifting village sites every few years.

The Khamu require the same basic trade goods as do the Meo—cloth, salt, iron. They do little weaving, yet most of their clothing is hand-woven. This is because Lao women, proficient weavers, prepare lengths of indigo-dyed fabric for men's garments and skirt pieces in the dark striped tones preferred by Khamu women, and these goods are set aside in village shops for exchange when the Khamu descend to barter. Like most mountain people, the Khamu strongly distrust paper currency and, when not paid in kind, insist upon being paid in old silver coin, which cannot be destroyed easily, as paper can, and the value of which can be judged by illiterate people.

Often the Khamu lack sufficient goods to trade, and they are forced to work for the Lao as coolies or servants. Some are employed in almost all Lao settlements, even small villages, and a fairly large number have been attracted to Luang Prabang. Groups of young men usually come together, frequently walking over the mountains for more than a week to reach the town. They come after clearing the *rai* in January-February, in three different periods between weddings and after the harvest (October-November).

There are two types of employment arrangements with these coolies; they receive a cash wage for the day's work and provide their own food and shelter, or they are given a token cash payment plus food, clothing and a place to sleep. The latter is usually the case for domestic servants, who are more or less permanently employed. Temporary coolies however, such as those periodically hired for road repairs, usually work for a month or so, until they have earned enough money to purchase the items for which they originally came to town.

To summarise :

Although the institution of *lam* has begun to decline, it is still of significance in Lao-Khamu trade.

The high cash yield of opium has enabled the Meo to obtain a relatively independent position, with a favorable balance of trade. Further, the value of their other crops is steadily increasing.

In contrast, the Khamu, who have no such high yield cash crop, have in many cases sought wage labor. This manual labor follows a seasonal pattern and is generally based on the immediate and personal needs of the individual.

The various peoples of northern Laos are being drawn more and more into links of inter-dependency, especially now with increases in means of transportation and the growing availability of consumer goods.

This paper has merely touched on trade patterns in the north of Laos. Further investigations of the impact of these emerging trade relationships on the social structure and general culture of the peoples concerned should be of great interest.