

Short Stories and Long Skirts: Finding Culture in Laos

Kim Alleyne

MCP Program
Department of Planning and Urban Studies
MIT



Before arriving in Lao's capital city of Vientiane, I had expectations of seeing dramatic examples of Lao culture. I was not disappointed. The elaborate, three tiered roofs and gold plating of the wats (Buddhist temples) were ever-present physical reminders that we were in Lao. On the busiest streets of the city's center, motor scooters, tuk tuks (taxis formed by attaching scooters), cars and bicycles jockeyed for position on dusty asphalt. From the back of the tuk tuks, we saw motorcycle drivers in face masks and flip flops, balancing 1-3 passengers (adult and 2-3 children) with ease. Streets leading out of the center were lined with hardened reddish dirt.

In my strolls, I passed short older Lao women walking with broad poles across their shoulders to balance baskets of fruits and other goods. In the mornings Buddhist monks filed by wearing bright orange robes to collect alms from store keepers and homes near our hotel. Women wore woven silk skirts with brilliant colors and attractive borders often embroidered in silver and gold thread. For their school uniforms, girls from primary school to college students wore white blouses with a navy skirt with a silver border at the bottom. Even the yellow Pedestrian Crossing signs show a woman and child in long skirts walking side by side in silhouette. To the tourist eye, all of these scenes inspired delight and digital photography.

At the same time that we saw many examples of Lao culture, we also noticed small indications of western influence. A look around Vientiane made it clear that some Lao are taking advantage of the dramatic increase in visitors since the Lao government opened the country to tourism in 1989. In 1990, there were 14,400 tourists. By 2002, there were over 700,000 tourists. The Lao government is seeking to encourage more tourism in this decade.¹

Storefront signs on streets around our hotel advertised hotels, restaurants, banks, internet cafes, places to buy souvenirs or get massages in English and sometimes in Lao. The Scandinavian bakery and the upscale French restaurant were two examples of establishments operated by foreigners. Translated restaurant menus offered a range of opportunities to experience noodles, soups, and (stir) fried dishes prepared in traditional Lao style. We could pay in Lao kip, Thai bath or American dollars. The

Vientiane Times provided daily news in English. Each day tuk tuk drivers asked if we needed rides and at night whispered about opportunities for illicit activity in English.

Even in the informal settlement where we worked some of the school children were able to say hello, tell us their names, and say good-bye in English they learned in school. We saw another child learning English nursery rhymes from a show broadcast through a satellite dish. The operators of the Phaeng Mae Gallery spoke English fluently. Later we found three more English speakers including one self-employed weaver who greeted us in English before taking a call on her cell phone.

“Game Plan: Find out how people share what it means to be Lao”

With all of these visual expressions of Lao culture, I was excited to begin my exploration. I was interested in how people maintain their sense of Lao identity. Specifically, I wanted to learn about the stories that older people share with younger children about being Lao and the country's history. These stories might have morals that indicate Lao cultural values. I thought this would be important issues to consider for preserving cultural traditions in the midst of economic change and physical modernization.

Like a good planner, I came with a plan to conduct my cultural exploration. My hope was to work with the Lao university students to interview residents about story telling in the informal settlement where we worked. I had considered that my lack of Lao language skills might be challenge. So, I brought disposable cameras figuring that young people in the settlement could take pictures and help me understand more of Lao culture and where they live.

Perhaps, even more important than what I found about cultural traditions in Lao was what I learned about how not to approach questions about culture in Laos. I will share my attempts to explore Lao cultural traditions and the challenges and questions uncovered in my search. This reflection paper is organized according to my three major plans and approaches to understanding Lao culture: to focus on storytelling, photographs taken by Lao residents, and women's choices to wear traditional clothing.

“Culture? What's that?”

As I had anticipated, not being able to speak Lao was a challenge. I could tell from the lengthy conversations in Lao and short translated answers, I was missing important parts of the conversation between the Lao university students and interviewees. Many people did not appear to understand my question. I can speculate about whether or not the translators understood me. But it seemed like the real challenge was for people to understand what I meant by culture. Culture is difficult to understand and maybe even more so if you are most familiar with only your own cultural context. Do you have to experience another culture or country in order to appreciate the actions and attitudes that are specific to your own culture? (Do you know what it means to be wet when you are in the water?)

Interestingly, the one time the idea of culture arose was in a conversation with a vice president of the village council in NongBouaTong Tai where we worked. He said that residents valued their weaving as a way to preserve their culture. He was concerned about what he said were cases of Thai people stealing the Lao designs. A manager of the Phaeng Mae Gallery believes that “people need to deal with the basic needs. When they have those and can live well, be well, they can think of culture.” (Personal Interview, January 2004)

Given this challenge, I began to ask about Lao history. That approach seemed to yield few responses. I shifted to asking about specific examples of Lao cultural traditions: weaving, the choice to wear the traditional skirts, metal working, and dance. It seemed like residents in the village connected to the specific examples more readily. However, asking about the stories that parents tell children about being Lao didn't seem to yield much rich conversation. I pressed on for a few days. I noticed that even when I asked a few of the university students they said they would check with their parents and get back to me. I was unable to follow up due to limited time, but I found it curious. Were the students unable or just uninterested in answering my questions? After the trip, I wondered whether this kind of storytelling happens in the wats (Buddhist temples) and focal point of many communities.

“Plan A: “Everyone knows these stories” or do they?”

One morning in the Scandinavian Bakery, I noticed two collections of Lao Folktales about a hero Xieng Mieng and about animals published by the Vientiane Times. I asked one of the workers which one she preferred. She recommended the Xieng Mieng stories because everyone knows them. (Xieng Mieng is a former monk who is known for being clever, cunning and even a deceitful. He is able to take advantage of situations involving the King of Lao and people of higher social status. See Appendix 1 for an example.) The staff at our hotel confirmed that these were popular stories. The head of the Architecture Department at the University also agreed. Convinced, I bought the book.

The book's preface describes how these stories have been collected for generations and how well they embody the Lao spirit in their tales of an underdog who bests everyone from the King to his peers.² Well it turns out that these stories have been told for generations, but only among some ethnic groups and in some regions.³ These stories are told among people of Lao Lum ethnicity, who today represent 68% of Lao people. (I have little sense of the scale at which the stories are shared, however.) Lao Loum live in the lowland areas and in Vientiane. They differ from the Lao Soung (high land) and Lao Thung (up land) in dress, religion, life style, and language. Using my village as an example, its Lao Lum residents had migrated from the Sam Neua region in the northern province of HouaPhan as well as from the Xieng Khuang province. People I interviewed said they from Sam Neua and did not tell these stories. We weren't able to get anyone from Sam Neua to talk about any stories told in Same Neua..

“I don't remember. How important are these stories anyway?”

“I don't remember” seemed to be the most common response to my questions about the Xieng Mieng stories. The Lao residents of NongBouaTong Tai whom I met who were familiar didn't remember any specific stories.⁴ It seems that these stories are not told often. Miss P. (age 72) mentioned that it was her husband who knew the stories. She said she didn't “know letters”, but thought it was important to talk with children about Lao history and about their family. Miss P. said her grandfather knew the stories well because his

parents taught him. She was the oldest person I interviewed. The other residents and college students learned the stories from their grandparents or parents or from teachers at school.

Despite the foggy memories, the people I spoke with do value the stories. The stories were seen as entertainment, literature and part of Lao history. Most people found Xieng Mieng stories funny and others commented on Xieng Mieng's intelligence. X. felt that there “ Stories would help me. He describes Xieng Mieng as “an agent of poor people. He solves problems and thinks fast.” He also says “[I]t's a good history of Lao. He wants Xieng Mieng to go [on] forever.” S. (age 26) believes Xieng Mieng taught how to deal with people. K. believes we should make Xieng Mieng a “heritage literature.”

I found consistently that the adults I spoke with felt that the stories were important to Lao culture and that it was important to share these tales. Most of the people interviewed agreed that they would teach the stories to children. S. (age 26) said “There is lots of culture from other countries. Every day many things to make young people excited. Many parts of [Lao] culture should write down and many parts people should know about [the] project.”

We did find a few Lao children who were willing to speak with me. (The rest shied away or ran in the other direction.) The braver ones mentioned that they had learned about the Xieng Mieng stories in school once I showed them the book to remind them about the stories. I couldn't tell if they remembered them or if they were just pointing to the illustrations in the book to answer my questions. They thought that the teacher had shared the stories to entertain the class. They said that the stories are funny. One interviewee also said that he considered Xieng Mieng a hero.

I wondered about what seemed like a deliberate choice to tell these stories in school. Was there a fear that these stories would be lost because they are not being taught at home? Would this be the case in a rural setting? Did parents have less interest in the stories or time? Do people living in the city experience story telling differently than people in rural areas, where 90% of the population live?

I had assumed that these stories were well known like fairy tales in the United States. However, the Xieng Mieng stories appear to be regarded in the same way as Aesop's Fables in the States. See Appendix 1 for an example of a story related to Xieng Mieng (alternative spelling Xiangmiang). While many of us remember the morals of Aesop's Fables, we may not remember the plot or all the details or even many of the stories. We might use an expression sour grapes, but we forget the story of the fox who tried in vain to reach grapes on a vine. When he realized that he could not get them he walked away calling them sour grapes. We may have learned fairy tales from our parents, at school, through television references in cartoons or Disney movies.

“Plan B: *What else can I do to learn about Lao culture and values?*”

Youth Drawings and Photos

Though not wholly related to culture, we asked children to draw and to take photos of what they liked and didn't like about their village. We gave three disposable cameras to the children and one to an adult woman working in the weaving workshop owned by Phaeng Mae Gallery. We held a lottery to assign camera to the boys and girls. There were more boys than girls so we gave the boys two cameras. An older woman took pictures as well of her family and co-workers in the workshop of weavers. I had my doubts as flashes started going off in the twilight that there would be anything worthwhile.

I was pleasantly surprised. These photos provided rich insights into what they liked about their specific community. Pictures showed younger and older family members and friends, open spaces, and women weaving. As a follow up, we invited the young people to make collages showing what they liked, didn't like and what they would like to change about their village. We displayed these collages in the village.

“Plan C: *Looming in the Distance*”

I was feeling somewhat frustrated by the lack of insight I felt I had gained into Lao culture through storytelling. However, it was only when I got back from Laos that I started thinking more broadly of the different ways that people express Lao culture. The silk weaving process is clearly a cultural tradition, but I had not focused on the personal decisions to wear the traditional woven clothing as an expression of culture. I felt like I had overlooked the obvious! My focus had been on how we could encourage tourists to come to the village – to come appreciate the culture and beauty of the silk weaving.

To provide some background, Lao Loum have worn traditional skirts for several generations. These long skirts called phaa sin wrap around with elaborate embroidery at the hem. (The Hmong or mountain people wear markedly different traditional clothing) I learned that the weaving traditions have been carried on by many generations of weavers in the northern province of Lao. Apparently, a woman who could weave well was considered a better marriage prospect. One weaver (38 years) talked with great pride about learning to weave from her mother at age six.

Over time, some of the weaving tradition and skill has been lost. The US-led bombing campaigns destroyed much of Northern Lao including Sam Neua where much of Lao weaving tradition was centered. Many of the families in NongBouaTong Tai are from the northern provinces. Some efforts to revitalize Lao weaving include the work of the Phaeng Mae Gallery and Carol Cassidy, then American designer who employs Lao women and promotes traditional Lao designs. World Education is an American NGO (nongovernmental organization) that has worked to support and expand silk production in Lao. Much of the weaving is produced and sold in the local markets to Lao, marketed to tourists or exported.

“Why do women choose to wear traditional clothing?”

Based on my observations, it seemed that some women may wear the phaa sin skirts almost as part of a uniform. I saw Lao clothing all day every day — from the women staff at the hotel who greeted us each morning to the women who served us dinner in the local restaurants. All of the weavers in the village wore traditional skirts as they attended to different parts of the weaving, spinning and dyeing process.

At the university, I had observed that the women students wore traditional Lao clothing, their school uniforms, from the first day of our workshop. By the third day, some of the girls wore informal clothing — western pants and shirts, especially the ones who were more confident about their English speaking skills. In the second week, more chose to wear pants. There were very few students who wore Lao clothing every day. I mentioned my observation to one student, but we weren't able to communicate well enough for me to understand her choice completely. She was very eager to share examples of the Lao skirts for our final workshop presentation, though. At the closing ceremony, the four students who performed the traditional Lao dances had more elaborate skirts with matching shawls than what we had seen every day. Later a classmate shared that he observed one of the girls producing a skirt to cover her jeans in order to enter the national museum during a weekend trip outside of Vientiane. Based on this the cultural norm of wearing traditional Lao clothing seems very strong.

To consider whether we were seeing more women wearing pants than traditional Lao skirts, we even took our own informal survey of women wearing traditional skirts while driving home one evening. Sitting in our tuk tuk (taxi wagon), we counted the women on motorcycles wearing traditional skirts or pants. Even though we lost count in the rush hour traffic, we decided that there were more women driving or riding side saddle with their feet dangling below their beautiful skirts than in pants.

After the workshop, I conducted my own informal email poll of the university students to ask about their attitudes and the choice to wear the skirts. One student, B., explained that the traditional Lao skirts are worn for work, school, temple, festivals,

weddings and visiting relatives. European clothing is cheaper than the traditional clothing and is used for going to the market, working on the farm or at home. Trousers are more popular among the teenagers in the city “who think that the trouser it a modern style of dressing”.⁵ Similarly another student, C., says that the “The culture, of Lao is a little bit change[d] and [women] wear less traditional suit. Because [of] new technology coming in to Laos, and some of them follow other cultures. New things coming so there like style is change.”⁶ Another man added “because fashion changes, tradition [sic] doesn't (so easily).”⁷

When I asked about the importance of wearing the skirts, C. said “I think it's very important, because It's a culture, if you don't follow other people will see the difference. That we have to follow year by year, we do follow the culture and when we do like that other people will know we are Lao people. In her opinion “I don't think Lao people will stop wearing Lao [clothing] people are going to still wearing tradition dress because it's very deep in their mind, I think, will never change, because It's still very important for Lao people.”⁸

“Conclusion: What am I left with?”

While my specific questions about Lao storytelling remain unanswered, I believe that the value in my research lies in the process. My experience shows the importance of having a flexible approach in efforts to learn about communities and what they value. I recommend that we start our research with our own observations and questions and exploring the ideas that people share with us. It is important to recognize ethnic distinctions and biases of the people who we would like to engage. These delineations can add significant complexity.

At a larger scale, my work raises questions about culture that must be approached carefully. In our admiration and concern of what we experience as different cultures, we become interested in ways to capture expressions and traditions before they are lost. These may be physical examples like Lao’s religious architecture and traditional Lao housing or artistic like the handicrafts, creativity, and stories. However, culture is not static. It evolves and changes over time. Contact with people outside of the culture has effects that cannot be controlled.

As we consider how to preserve culture, first we need to define culture and how people express their cultural identities. We need to consider own identity and role as outsiders. What is our motivation for preservation? How are we engaging local residents? We must avoid the trap of wanting to enjoy technological advances, while advocating that others preserve their culture at the expense of material comfort. Rather than dictate what we as outsiders consider valuable and worth preserving, we have to work with local residents to understand their interests, identify local resources and make joint commitments to preserve cultural heritage. We must recognize the resources necessary for a given preservation initiative and ongoing commitment.

Appendix 1

Example of Xieng Mieng Story

Xiangmiang Outwits the King

Xieng Mieng is well known for being his tricks and intelligence. He is a member of the Royal Court of the Kingdom of Lao. The King tries to trick Xiangmiang. One day the King announced that he would give a reward to anyone who could make him jump in a pond. No one takes on his challenge. Xieng Meung tells the King that he would not tell him to jump in, but that he could get him to come out. Once the King gets in, Xieng Meung points out that he has made the King get in the pond. The King was surprised and waited for another opportunity to match wits with Xieng Meung.

Source: Wajuppa, Tosssa. A Lao folktale retold in English by Tosssa Wajuppa. In “Lao Language and Cultural Resources.” Center for Southeast Asian Studies. Northern Illinois University.

http://www.seasite.niu.edu/lao/LaoFolkLiterature/chapter5/chapter5_fp.htm. Xiangmiang is an alternative spelling.

Works Cited and Consulted

- Alleyne, Kim. Personal Reflections. January, 2004. Unpublished.
- Association of Southeast Asian Nations. "Lao P.D.R." 1996.
<http://www.aseansec.org/tourism/laos.htm>
- Embassy of The Lao People's Democratic Republic. Peace Independence Democracy Unity Prosperity. "Newsletter". July – August 2000.
<http://www.laoembassy.com/news/JulyAug2000.htm#24>
- Epstein, Stephen. Lao Folktales: Xieng Mieng: The Cleverest Man in the Kingdom. Vientiane: Vientiane Times Publications. 1995.
- The Nation. "New air and bus routes to boost Lao tourism." Circle of Asia. March 13, 2003. <http://www.circleofasia.com/News.asp?nID=65>
- Personal Correspondence. March 2, 2004,
- Personal Correspondence. March 6, 2004.
- Personal Correspondence. March 30, 2004 and April 1, 2004.
- Surveys of Residents in NongBouaTong Tai. Translated by Thippachan Southipanya. Vientiane. January 2004. Unpublished.
- Surveys of Students from University of Laos Department of Architecture. Vientiane. January 2004. Unpublished.
- Vientiane Community Forum. Personal Correspondence. March 30 – April 1, 2004.
<http://www.laotian.info/vientiane/index.php?board=13;action=display;threadid=1391>
- Wajuppa, Tosssa. A Lao folktale retold in English by Tosssa Wajuppa. In "Lao Language and Cultural Resources. Center for Southeast Asian Studies. Northern Illinois University.
http://www.seasite.niu.edu/lao/LaoFolkLiterature/chapter5/chapter5_fp.htm

Yamauchi, Sayo and Donald Lee. Tourism development in the Lao People's Democratic Republic. Economic and Social Affairs. United Nations (1, 3) ST/ESA/1999/DP.9 DESA Discussion Paper No. 9. June 1999

Endnotes

- ¹ Sayo Yamauchi and Donald Lee. Tourism development in the Lao People's Democratic Republic. Economic and Social Affairs. United Nations. 1999; New air and bus routes to boost Lao tourism. The Nation. March 13, 2004. <http://www.circleofasia.com/News.asp?nID=65>
- ² Stephen Epstein. Tales of Xieng Mieng. Vientiane: The Vientiane Times. 2001.
- ³ There Xieng Mieng stories are also documented as poems. They were originally written on manuscripts made of palm leaves. Copies can be found in the Lao National Library. The date of the first Xieng Mieng stories is unknown but is thought to pre-date the 16th century.
- ⁴ I surveyed 3 adults and 4 youth (13 – 17 years) who lived in the village and 3 university students about the Xieng Mieng stories. The interviews in the village took place during the day. The names of all interviewees in this paper have been changed. All quotes are taken from these interviews unless otherwise noted. Surveys of Residents in NongBouaTong Tai, January 2004. Surveys of Students from University of Laos Department of Architecture, January 2004.
- ⁵ Personal Correspondence, March 6, 2004.
- ⁶ Personal Correspondence, March 2, 2004
- ⁷ Personal correspondence, March 30, 2004 and April 1, 2004.
- ⁸ Personal Correspondence, March 2, 2004