

AN APPRECIATION OF COLONEL HENRI ROUX'S

Quelques minorités ethnique du Nord-Indochine

By

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This extremely interesting publication appeared in the French monthly magazine the *France-Asie* (Saigon) in the form of a monograph in its January-February 1954 number. Monsieur Tran-Van-Chu has collaborated, and His Excellency Nguyễn-Dà, the Imperial delegate, who was in charge of the protection of all the hill people of the former undivided Viet-Nam empire, has written a short preface. Monsieur René de Berval, the editor of *France-Asie* which always, in a true spirit of understanding and sympathy, has been treating the problems of the cultures of the various human groups occupying the territories of former French Indochina, notes in his *avant propos* that Colonel Roux has also shown this same spirit. From our personal knowledge of the author during his long stay as Military Attaché at the French Legation in Bangkok in the 1930's we would gladly confirm this. When M.de Berval maintains, however, that the hill people of South Viet Nam are of an Oceanic origin, we would protest, nor do we think that the Khamuk wandered up from the South to their present habitats in the North, but rather that the Indonesians or Malayo-Polynesian speaking people, as well as the Môn-Khmer speaking groups of Indochina have all arrived in their present habitats from the North or Northwest. M.de Berval furthermore opines that in order to safeguard the hill peoples' independent life and culture, the utmost benevolence and tolerance is necessary on the part of the Vietnamese people. To this there can be no argument.

The extreme north of Tongking and Laos, bordering the long frontier of South China, is peopled by a mosaic of different tribes which have all migrated southward from China. The oldest of these are the Khamuk (Môn-Khmer) and the Indonesian but Môn-Khmer-speaking Lamet. Next come the Tai or Thai, variously

called *Thô*, *Yāng* or *Nung* by the Vietnamese and the Chinese. While the Thai entered North Indochina and took possession of its fertile river valleys and plains more than a thousand years ago, with the exception of the Khamuk the hill tribes consisting of the Akha, the Phu Noi, the Hô, the Man or Yao as well as the Meo, who are not to be met with in the valleys, all are recent migrants. It would seem needless to repeat here that the *Thô*, *Yāng*, *Nung*, White, Black and Red Thai, the Thai Lū, and the Thai Nūa of North Vietnam and the Kingdom of Laos, together with the Lao, the Siamese, the Shan or Thai Yai, the Burmo-Thai and the Thai Ahom of Assam are all of the same stock as are the Thai peoples of Southern China such as the Tayok (Thai Hok Chao), the Lung, the Thai Lai, the Thai Nam, and the Pai-yi and Thai Nūa in Yunnan, or the numerous Nung, *Thô* and Hakka (Thai-speaking) of Kwangtung and Kwangsi, and the Dïoi of Kweichow. Although their various dialects may seem somewhat different, no one knowing the King's Siamese will long be in doubt that they all are but facets of one and the same language: the Thai. Thus a Thai from Khamti Laung in North Burma or a Dïoi from South China, who found himself in Bangkok, would soon make himself understood to residents of the capital.

The ethnic groups studied by Colonel Roux all live in the extreme north of the Kingdom of Laos with the exception of the White Thai (*Sibsong Chao Tai*) and the Black Thai of *Mūang Then* which is known to the Vietnamese by the nonhistorical name of *Dien-bien-phu*, although no Vietnamese actually live there. The White and the Black Thai were during the last quarter of the 19th century brought under the rule of Emperor Tu-Duc of Vietnam from their former independent status by the wiles of a Chinese merchant, named *Deo-Van-Tri*. This man, who had a flourishing trade in tea and opium, was raised to a kind of princely rank, a *Fiafai*, and as such became the vassal of the emperor.

The territories occupied by the Akha, the Phu Noi, the Tsa Khamuk, the White and the Black Thai as well as the Meo are of a very mountainous nature, a wild country full of high and precipi-

tous hills. There are very few roads; communication is generally by bridle paths along which burdens are carried either on pack animals or on human backs. A characteristic trait of this hilly country is the heavy erosion it is undergoing which at times is detaching whole flanks of the hills, hurling the débris down into the deep and narrow river valleys. There are a few plains, however, such as at Phong Saly (to the north of Luang Phrabang), at Müang Then, which is an old lake bed, and at Lai Chau. All the tribes mentioned here live mingled between each other, the Thai in the fertile river valleys and on the plains, the Meo on the very tops of the hills, and the rest in the hills between the Thai and the Meo. Colonel Roux knows all these human groups by heart from his long stay as Commander of the former 4th Military Zone, and he says affectionately that these "primitives" are men like us, harbouring the same feelings, hopes and desires in their hearts as we do, and that by long contact one learns to understand and to love them. No wonder that he was loved by these peoples of the hills and the jungle.

The Akha

In Siam the Akha are called Kha Kô. They came from Yünnan Province, and are related to the Black Lolo (No-su), their language being typically Tibetan. They are found on the hills from west to east in northernmost Laos, from Wieng Phu Kha (Haut Laos) to the hills towering over the valleys of Nam U and its affluents. The total number of the Akha is probably between fifty and sixty thousand. In Siam there are a few groups of these people, some near Doi Suthep west of Chiangmai, another group to the east of Chiengsen (studied by Dr. Hugo Bernatzik in his enthralling book *Die Geister der gelben Blätter*), and finally in a large village near the old princely town of Phrae. The latter group has now for all purposes become completely Thai.

The Akha living in the former 4th Military Zone are divided into seven tribes (clans), all speaking the same language and possessing the same manners and customs, though the dress of their

women differs somewhat. The men are quite tall and rather muscular; in profile they are clear-cut with often aquiline noses. Their look is frank but not so energetic as that of their neighbours, the Meo. The Akha men dress similarly to the Chinese and still wear a short pigtail; their head-gear is a skull cap or a turban. It is to be regretted that they are often heavy opium smokers. The Akha women are generally well shaped, agile and active; they are also quite tall and of a slender build. With their straight noses and rectilinal eyebrows, their picturesque, vividly coloured and embroidered dresses and glittering jewels, they lead one to think of European gypsies. Some tribal women wear very short skirts leaving part of their stomachs uncovered, and all Akha women wear gaiters of cloth in order to protect their legs against the bites of the bloodthirsty land leeches. With regard to head-dress, the quite young girls use a kind of skull cap decorated with pieces of silver, while those of marriageable age wear a peculiar head-dress consisting of two pieces, one of which is shaped like a diadem and made of silver. The married woman's head-dress is a tall pointed cap, not unlike those of European ladies of the 13th and 14th centuries. The Akha women are thus far from being unattractive, and the writer remembers having met a group of these pretty Akha girls on the Doi Suthep in 1936. The Akha women are also gay and free and do not allow their men folk to oppress them.

The Akha possess certain myths according to one of which their former home was the region between the Shan States and the Hô country (extreme north of Laos). The Akha warred against the Hô, and, thanks to their crossbows, won. That probably happened about 700 years ago. According to another tradition, their original home was situated in the Chinese provinces of Hunan and Hupeh. Again, another myth relates how giant wasps were on the point of exterminating the Akha, and how they overcame these pests by the help of fire, only afterwards to be made the slaves of the wily Hô, wherefore they migrated to their present habitats. The Akha do not possess any letters now but according to one tradition they once possessed an alphabet which was written on buf-

falo hide. However, as buffalo hide is considered a delicacy the Akha ate it and thereby forever lost the knowledge of writing. In return for this piece of gastronomy the Akha were endowed with an extraordinary food memory, better than that of any other hill tribe.

Some of the Akha tribes obey a supreme chief, elected from among the most wealthy and influential members of the tribe. This chief controls the village chiefs, and also acts as a supreme judge. The Akha are nomadic agriculturists, changing the place of their villages and their fields every three or four years. The house of an Akha is, therefore, not thought much of. To pull it down and erect a new one is quite a simple matter. The real property of an Akha is his hoard of silver. If the husband dies the widow will inherit all, but in case of re-marrying she must hand it over to her male children. The Akha homesteads are generally situated at an altitude of 1,000 to 1,400 metres above sea level. The Akha house is built partly on poles with the rear side resting on the slope of a hill. The building materials are bamboo, the roof being thatched with grass. These houses may be quite roomy: the most important thing in them is the Apolakhay's (the ancestor's) abode which is in a small basket placed above the head of the bed of the father. When an Akha house is to be put up all the men of the village take a hand with much merriment, everyone shouting at the top of his voice, and everyone acting as if he were the director of the undertaking.

The Akha believe that every human being is the possessor of three souls, and that if one of them leaves the body during sleep and does not return from its wanderings outside the body, the owner may fall very ill. To cure a sick person a sorcerer must use his magic to recall the erring soul. In case all the three souls should leave the body its owner may die. Such ideas are widespread among other peoples of the Further Indian subcontinent, such as the Khmer, the various Proto-Indochinese (Moi or Kha) as well as many groups of Thai people.¹

1. *Vide* the masterly study of this subject in "La cérémonie de l'appel des Esprits vitaux chez les Cambodgiens" by Mme. E. Poree-Maspero, *BEFEO*, vol. XLV, part I. pp. 145-184; also Capt. Rispauds, "Sur une tribu des confins sino-laotiens, les Thai Lü" in *France-Asie*, No. 97, July 1954.

The Akha are animists. They believe that after death the soul goes to stay with their ancestors in the realm of the dead. However, after the lapse of some time the soul may be reincarnated in a human being, or in an animal if it has lived a sinful life in its former existence. The Akha thus believe that the souls of all living people come from Nèmi-khang (the Realm of the Dead). The Akha are also ancestor worshippers and make sacrifices to the last three generations. As all other Mongols, the Akha are patrilineal. According to the belief of the Akha, sickness is never due to natural causes, but is rather caused by some malevolent spirit from the Nemi-khang or the jungle who has taken possession of the sick person's body. And again the help of the sorcerer is sought. He must try to expel the evil spirit by appropriate prayers and sacrifices of chickens or pigs.

As regards marriage, the young Akha are free to choose their partners. The parents rarely interfere. The young Akha men prefer active and industrious girls to pretty ones, and the girl's choice is the hardworking young fellow who does not smoke opium. Courting often takes place during work in the fields, the young man singing out his inclination for the girl of his desire. If the girl accepts the proposal, she does so by singing her reply. If she does not accept his declaration of love, she will either not reply or start singing about something else. A similar kind of courtship by duets (and flute play) is found among the Northeastern Thai and the Diao of Kweichow and Kwangsi. Courtship may also take place in the house of the girl's parents, just as it does among many of the Thai in North Siam, in the Northeast, in Laos and among the Thai Yai. Marriage may be by the consent of the girl's parents or by abduction, but the young folk always marry within their own tribe. Marriage is arranged by a go-between, and the wedding is celebrated by a feast of pork and chicken. The Akha have a curious custom that when a young girl is to leave her house in order to go to that of her bridegroom, her sisters, brothers and other near relatives start throwing all kinds of dirty things on her dress. The dirtier the things the more she will be loved in her married state! However, as soon as she arrives at the

house of her fiancé she will change to a clean and more becoming dress. The marriage ceremony consists of a meal eaten by the bridal couple after which the young folk are considered man and wife. The young man has, of course, to present his wife with many gifts which are praised and made known to all in song. During the feast the old people of the village will sing: "Love each other well, live together till your death, may you have many children," but also that girls do not count, and, to the young wife: "You will have to carry heavy burdens". The youngmen of the O - Pa tribe buy their wives, and these are expensive. A good girl costs one pig, one hen, 50-120 jars of spirit and a hundred taels in silver. Marriage by abduction seems to be quite common in most of the Akha tribes. Children are welcome but the stupid superstition that the birth of twins is the greatest of all calamities is firm among the Akha.

The death of any one is a welcome opportunity for the village sorcerer to act as priest with the sacrifice of many pigs whereby he will get his fat portion. Food is offered to the dead, the sorcerer prays the day long, but real tears are also shed. Prior to burial a poor buffalo is sacrificed in the extremely cruel manner common to all hill peoples. Among the Pu Li Akha it is the custom before lowering the coffin into the tomb to lead a horse up to the coffin, the idea being, of course, that the horse is to serve as mount for the dead in life hereafter. The horse is thereafter let loose in the jungle and, three days after the burial, is recaptured - if it has'nt been eaten by a tiger! If an Akha has a bad dream the sorcerer is called and a propitiary sacrifice is made to the evil spirit responsible. The Akha have also some tabus, and their annual feasts are eight in number, the most important being the one after harvest and those worshipping the Apolakhay.

Colonel Roux's study of the Akha concludes with a number of Akha texts and no less than 14 pages of a French - Akha glossary. We have treated the Akha at considerable length here because this interesting and by no means unsympathetic people has not formerly been discussed in the *Journal*.

The Phu Noi or Khā Phai Phu Noi

This group probably belongs to the Môn - Khmer or Austro-Asiatic category although a cursory glance at Colonel Roux's vocabulary suggests that the Phu Noi language is rather different from other Môn - Khmer tongues. Colonel Roux relates the well known tale of Khun Bolom (Borom-Parama) and the two giant pumpkins out of which came first the Khamuk, the Phu Noi and other Khā (the Proto-Indochinese) as well as the Lao. It seems, from what we know of the history of Nan Chao, that this myth may be explained as follows: The first pumpkin represents the migration of the various Khā people (Malayo-Polynesian and Môn-speaking Proto-Indochinese) who preceded the inhabitants of the second pumpkin, the Thai, who came down from Nan Chao and conquered the northern parts of Indochina from its earlier inhabitants probably more than 1,200 year ago. Certain Thai historians (Nai Sǔia Kanchanaphandh) have identified Khun Borom with the great King Piraka (Chinese Piloko) who reigned in Nan Chao during the first half of the 8th century A.D. King Piraka or his son, the god Indra of the myth, is probably synonymous with the King Borom who conquered Sibsong Chau Thai, Hua Phan Ha, and other parts of Laos and Tongking, making Müang Then or Theng the capital of a southern vassal state of Nan Chao. It will be remembered that it was from Müang Then that issued those Thai emigrants who conquered Chiengsen, the central Mekhong valley, and the valley and plains of the Menam Chao Phraya.

The Phu Noi belong to the Khā Phai group who live in the Nam U valley, and the name given them by the Lao is generally translated as "People of the Lesser Hills", which does not seem to be correct as their hills, on an average, reach 5,000 feet. The number of the Phu Noi in the former 4th Military Zone was about 10,000, and they were domiciled in the Phong Saly district. Their villages are built on a loose kind of soil which, during the rainy season is transformed into a quagmire, necessitating all communications to be made on stilts! The Phu Noi are a small people, the men averaging but about 1.55 m, the women 5 centimetres less. Both sexes are

very muscular, and are probably not surpassed by any other group in Indochina in their capacity to carry of heavy burdens. They may cover in one day a stretch of 22 kilometres up and down steep hills carrying on their backs boxes weighing 35 kilograms. The Phu Noi men are muscular without being heavy or clumsy, while their women, quite attractive while young, age quickly after their 20th year, becoming fat, ugly and clumsy because among the Phu Noi women are beasts of burden and are much oppressed by the men folk. Nevertheless, both sexes may be called industrious though not very intelligent. Like all other hill people the Phu Noi are *rai* (slash-and-burn) cultivators. The men dress in a short coat and a pair of baggy trousers; their hair is worn in a chignon and covered by a red turban. The dress of the women is more elaborate; they wear a coat reaching down to the hips, a knee-long skirt and gaiters, and an apron which is not worn in front but over their hindquarters. The Phu Noi women are very unattractive. Their hair is made up in a knot over their left ear and inside a blue turban. Besides working side by side with the men in the *rais*, the women learn to weave on very primitive looms. Both sexes blacken their teeth and wear only a few personal ornaments with the exception of some silver bracelets. Their villages are often built on both sides of the crest of a hill and always near a source of clear water.

The Phu Noi villages generally number not less than fifty houses. The paddy is stored in a group of bins always at a good distance from the dwelling houses to protect them against fires. There may be small garden plots with pepper and Indian corn, besides fruit trees such as pommeloos, oranges and bananas. The latter plants often surround the entire village. The village is partly permanent, unlike those of other hill tribes. Thus one part is permanent and grouped around the temple; the other may be shifted every two or three years, according to the sites of the *rais*. The houses of the Phu Noi are built on poles. They are small but very solid. Like all houses in Indochina, there is a place reserved for the *lares*, or protecting house spirits. As regards the construction

of a house, this is done in a like manner as in the case of the Akha, but as the Phu Noi are Buddhists it is a monk who fixes the auspicious day and hour for the work to be carried out.

The food of the Phu Noi consists of rice, vegetables and, rarely, a little pork. Rats, snakes and a kind of flying white-ant may also figure in the diet. The meat of pythons, which are numerous in the Phu Noi country, is considered a regal meal. The unhealthy custom of eating edible earth is also practiced by the Phu Noi. Betel chewing is common. Like other hill people, the Phu Noi are not too clean and only rarely wash themselves. The Phu Noi has a few horses which are only used for riding and are badly looked after. Buffaloes are not used for field work but are indispensable at the great sacrifices to the *phi* (spirits). As pack animals oxen play a big rôle. Goats are exclusively reared as offerings to the "Spirits of the Lares". Pigs and poultry as well as cats and dogs are also kept.

The administration of a group of villages is exercised by a chief with the Lao title of Phaya. As regards property, a widow will, if she has any children, inherit all; in other cases she will only receive a part of her husband's estate.

The Phu Noi are Buddhists by religion but like so many other people of Further India they believe in a plurality of souls, and that sickness is caused by one or more of these souls leaving the body. A woman possesses one soul more than a man. Deceased Phu Noi, who have followed the eightfold path of the Buddha, enter Paradise. From there they may, however, after a long time, be reborn on earth in bodies of rich and great persons. In the invocations of the Phu Noi the Bramanic gods are also called upon, no doubt a borrowing from the neighbouring Lao. Besides being Buddhists, the Phu Noi are also animists, and the village sorcerer is an important personage.

Marriage between young folk is always arranged by a go-between, and it may take some time before all the pour-parlers are ended and marriage can be celebrated. On the wedding day the bridegroom makes a sacrifice of four pigs and a dog. The latter is sacrificed in honour of the manes of the house. The Lawa of Bôluang in North Siam also sacrifice dogs as a part of their marriage ceremonies². The marriage ceremony occupies several days. The bride is given a dowry by her parents consisting of paddy, domestic animals and kitchen utensils. The actual ceremony consists in the binding of white (consecrated) cotton thread around the wrists of the bridal couple while the village elders pour their blessings over them. The newly married couple thereafter go to the temple to offer a bouquet of flowers to the monks. Usually the young man chooses his future wife himself and the parents on both side do not interfere. The Phu Noi man may keep two wives but never more. A Phu Noi man may divorce his wife without giving any reasons for such a step. While relations with a married woman are tabu, young girls are allowed much liberty. The birth of twins is considered a misfortune and only one of them is allowed to live.

Monks officiate at death and burial. The Phu Noi often consult oracles. This is done by the aid of two pieces of chicken bones. There are four annual feasts of which that of the 15th day of the waxing moon in the 12th month is the most important. Gifts are then offered the temple and the monks and in the evening every one in the village becomes gloriously drunk. The Phu Noi clergy are not very strict in their observances. They drink spirits, smoke opium, eat in the afternoon and ride horses. The monks know a little Pali but most of the people are analphabetic. Instead of written messages they use pieces of notched bamboo or, in case of an urgent message, a piece of burnt wood to which is attached a feather.

2. *Vide* Hutchinson and Seidenfaden, "The Lawa in Northern Siam," *JSS*, Vol. XXVII, part I, p. 160.

The Tsa (Khā) Khamuk.

This important Austro-Asiatic group of Môn-Khmer speaking people inhabits large regions in North Laos, as well as in the former 4th and 5th Military Zones. One finds their villages in the hills from a little south of Lai Chan in the north to not far from Wiengchan in the south, and on the west from far inside the province of Müang Sing to Müang Then (Dien-bien-phu) to the east. A large group is domiciled to the north of the plateau of Chiengkwang (Müang Phuan). The Khamuk, living to the northwest of Luang Phrabang are also called Khā Khwaen; while the groups settled in the hills south of the old royal city are often called Phu Tüing, i. e., the people living above. There are a few Khamuk villages in North Siam in the *changwat* of Nān. The territories peopled by the Khamuk are often widely separated from each other by stretches of land inhabited by other ethnic groups, such as the Lao and Thai Lü, the Black and White Thai, the Thai Nūa, the Thai Phong and Thai Phuan. Indeed, both North Laos and North Tongking are peopled by a veritable mosaic of ethnic groups mixed with each other in the most intricate manner. Speaking in general, it can be said, however, that all the Thai live in the valleys or on the plains or plateaux, while the other ethnic groups are settled in the hills.

The hill people live, so to say, *en etageres*. The Khamuk claim as their birth place the country of the Pumpkins, i. e., Müang Then. The Khamuk myth about their origin begins with the Deluge from which only two people, a brother and a sister, were saved in a kind of Noah's Ark. After the Deluge, being the only two human beings left alive, they had to marry. The girl, after a confinement of three years, bore two large pumpkins, out of which sallied forth the Thai and the Khamuk. The Thai, who have about the same myth say, however, that the Khamuk appeared first, which no doubt is the correct version.

The Khamuk villages are often quite opulent with their women's heavy silver ornaments, their many domestic animals, and their ancient bronze drums, so highly prized in all Further India.

Their villages possess many fruit trees and kitchen gardens and sometimes have well built houses. The Khamuk are *rai* cultivators. According to their own traditions, as well as to certain Lao chronicles, the Khamuk formerly (more than a thousand years ago) were the proud citizens of a vast empire with its capital in the Nam U valley. This seems to be corroborated by Shan myths. However, when the Thai came down from the north this empire was broken up, the invaders seized the fertile river valleys and drove the Khamuk up into the jungle-clad hills. Since then the Khamuk have been the humble servants of the Thai.

As regards the famous bronze drums, it seems that these originally (just before or not long after the beginning of the Christian Era)³ were the handiwork of the Indonesians who, at that time, peopled what is now North and Middle Vietnam. Further, that the Karen and the Shan (and the Khamuk?) learnt the art from the Indonesians.

The Khamuk villages are small, consisting of not more than 15 houses, with the exception of the Khamuk villages in the Phong Saly district where there may be as many as 50 well built dwellings all constructed of wood and bamboo and all on piles. The utensils for preparing and eating food are few and crude. In two small parcels, hung above the central fireplace, the house spirits (one for the husband and one for the wife) are believed to reside. They are, of course, taboo for any outsider to touch. The Khamuk are a timid and shy people due to their oppression by the Thai and the Meo. They resemble the Khā Bahnar at Kontum, being somewhat dark-skinned. The men dress in long black trousers, a blue coat and wear a voluminous black turban. The women are not very attractive, moving heavily and clumsily with their bodies bent forward as if always climbing upwards with heavy burdens on their backs. The eyes of the Khamuk women have a peculiar black and fearful

3. Vide V. Goloubev, "L'age du bronze au Tonkin et dans le Nord Annam," *BEFEO*, vol. XXIX, 1929, and U. Guehler, "Studie über alle Metal-Trommeln," *JSS*, vol. XXXV, Part I.

look like those of scared and chased animals. They dress in a short indigo - coloured bodice, leaving a broad band bare above the waist with a black or green skirt of the Lao model completing the dress. The women also wear large, bonnet - like indigo blue turbans, and they delight in much heavy silver ornaments in the form of bracelets, finger rings and small plates hung on their bosoms. The Khamuk women do not know how to weave.

By character the Khamuk are timid and shy but it must be remembered that many years ago there were quite a number of volunteer Khamuk gendarmes in Nān who distinguished themselves by their discipline and neat appearance. The French also had good experience with their Khamuk *travailleurs*. The Khamuk used to be under the orders of several big chiefs who again were subject to the Lao governors. The Khamuk are animists and people hill and dales with a number of terrible spirits ; they also believe in the *Phi Pop*, like the Sō⁴ All these obnoxious *phi* must, of course, be bribed by appropriate sacrifices and incantations by the sly village sorcerer. Presages for good or bad happenings may be taken from the study of the yolk of an egg. Colonel Roux goes deeply into the customs, manners and beliefs of the Khamuk, and shows how important it is for the Administration to be acquainted with them. To know these points well is to understand the psyche of this interesting people.

The work in the *rai* is combined with sacrifices and a duet between boys and girls (the wording of which nobody understands now). After harvest a kind of sacrifice is made to the aratory implements. The Khamuk harvest paddy by hand, ear by ear. Marriage is arranged by the parents without asking for the young peoples' consent. The newly wedded young man must stay in his in - laws' house for eight years during which time the nuptial bonds may be broken at will. The dead are buried without any ceremonies but are given Charon's Ferry money. The Khamuk believe in metamorphosis and that they may be changed into a stag or a tiger. Colonel Roux offers nine and a half pages of Khamuk vocabulary.

4. *Vide* E. Seidenfaden, "The Sō and the Phuthai," *JSS*, Vol. XXXIV, Part 2.

The White and Black Thai.

These branches of the widespread Thai Nation are also called, respectively, Thai Don or Thai Khão and Thai Dam or Thai Lam. The first named, who form the so-called Sibsong Chao Thai, or twelve principalities, live around their old capital Lai Chau and along the upper course of the Red River. An important clan is also settled on the lower course of the Black River. The Black Thai live around the old historical site of Mûang Then, well known as the point of dispersal of those Thai who later conquered Northern Siam and the valleys of the Menam Chao Phraya and the Mekhong from the Môn and the Khmer.

The Black Thai are mostly in the river valleys and on the plains to the northeast, east, south and southwest of Mûang Then. Further westwards there are also some enclaves with Black Thai. These people are well known in Thailand where they are met with from Sawankalok in the north and southwards to Supan, Petchaburi and even as far south as Chumphorn. In Siam they are called Lao Song Dam, i.e., the black-clad Lao. The Swedish ethnologist Dr. K.G. Izikowitz in his interesting book *Over Dimmornas Berg* (Over the Hills of the Clouds) gives a charming picture of these engaging people. Contrary to this author, we do not think that the Thai were settled in the Red River delta prior to the advent of the Vietnamese, but that the original population of North Vietnam (Tongking), apart from the long extinct pygmies, Proto-Australians and Melanesians, were Indonesians of the Thai-Kadai-Indonesian alignment from a region somewhere in Yünnan. These Indonesians were overrun by a wave of Môn-Khmer with the result that they changed their own language for that of the invaders. The base of the present Vietnamese language is undoubtedly Môn-Khmer but the tones were adopted from the Thai, perhaps during the Thai occupation of Tongking during the 8th-9th centuries A.D. Moreover, the Chinese occupation lasting many hundred of years influenced the North Vietnamese both physically and linguistically. The identity of the Vietnamese with the Thai, as proposed by Colonel Roux, is thus due to their common but very ancient ancestry. The late

German geographer, Prof. Credner, opined that the Thai originated in the hot tropical river valleys of South China, and that they never settled in high places. However, in North Laos and Tongking, Thai Lit and White and Black Thai often live at heights of from 600 to 1,200 meters. The Black Thai have conserved their old traditions better than the White Thai who have been influenced by the Chinese to such an extent that about one-third of those living at Lai Chau are half Chinese.

Among the White Thai certain families are forbidden to eat the flesh of some animals because of the likeness of their family names with those of the animals. This may point to a former totemistic organization. As regards the myth of the origin of both Thai tribes, this is similar to that of the Khamuk.

The country of the White Thai is very hilly with crags reaching 2,000 meters. The Meo, who arrived not a hundred years ago, have destroyed the forests, leaving the hills covered with tall grasses where now roam herds of wild elephants and gaur. This deforestation is responsible for a change in climate where the heavy rains destroy the humus on the hills and cause much damage to the paddy fields in the river valleys with the gravel and pieces of rock which the rains sweep down from the hills above. Many Thai are, therefore, leaving the former fertile valleys to cultivate the slopes of the hills. However, changing the hot fever-ridden valleys for the fresh air of the hills may also change them into a healthier and more energetic people.

Colonel Roux estimates the number of White Thai to be about 80,000. He does not inform us about the number of Black Thai who formerly were much more numerous than now. Wars and the cruelties of gangs of Chinese pirates of the different "flags" have thinned them out especially in the seventies and eighties of the last century. The White Thai are of a finer build and have finer features than their Black cousins, especially the women. The men are expert in the use of canoes on the turbulent waters of the

Red River. The men of both groups dress, like other men of the hills, in indigo blue coats or shirts and trousers and cut their hair like the Lao. The White Thai women, whose skin is fairer than that of the Vietnamese, are often pretty with their straight eyes and eyebrows. They approach the Hindu type, according to the author. They are more elegant and coquettish, too, than the Vietnamese women. Their grande toilette consists of a long night gown-like robe of silk or black cotton of which the lower part can be rolled around the waist. To this is added a skirt and a short embroidered bodice. The robe has buttons of silver made as cockchafers or butterflies. Their long and beautiful hair is rolled into a knot on the back of the head which is protected by huge straw hats.

The men of the Black Thai wear, in addition to the above-mentioned dress, a huge indigo blue turban. Their women dress in long black robes with a scarf around the waist using the same kind of dress for ordinary days and feasts. They also wear, like their *Thô* sisters, long trousers. For ceremonial purposes the women put on a big, finely-ornamented turban.

The Thai houses are all built on piles, and in case of wealthy people or notables they may contain six rooms and reach a length of 75 meters. Several households may find room in such houses. While the young people of the White Thai are just as free in their sexual relations as the Lao, the young folk of the Black Thai are more serious and diligent in working the fields. The young White Thai girls are well known for their graceful and charming fan dancing. There are, however, also some less attractive traits connected with some of the White Thai. Among an important group of White Thai living on the banks of the Black River it is the custom once a year for the whole adult population to gather in a pitch dark cave where the two sexes at a signal given by one of the old men indulge in the most promiscuous sexual relations without being able to see one another. This unusual custom may be explained as a kind of fertility rite conducted to ensure good crops and material progress. The Thai myth about the Deluge preceded

by a terrible drought, and the re-peopling of the earth is, in part, identical with certain Shan myths.⁵ Both the White and Black Thai are pagans and inter their dead with proper ceremonies, erecting poles with fluttering flags on the burial mounds.

The Meo (Mhong)

The number of this virile ethnic group in Laos and Tongking is probably not less than a couple of hundred thousand. They are all comparatively recent immigrants, i.e., from 120 to 140 years ago. Readers of the *Journal* will be acquainted with the translation and commentaries by the writer to a Siamese reply to the Society's Questionnaire about the Meo.⁶ And as the manners, customs, means of livelihood as well as the dress of these people are treated at length in that paper we shall here be content with some extracts from Colonel Roux's sympathetic picture of these courageous, liberty-loving and individualistic highlanders, who certainly are his favourites, and refer readers for further information to the late Father M. Savina's excellent *Histoire des Miao*.

Colonel Roux underlines the many characteristic traits of the Meo psyche which reminds one of the European psyche. Indeed, Savina propounds a theory, based on an ancient Meo myth, that they originally were settled in Western Asia from whence they trekked through Siberia to China to their present habitats in Kweichow and Süchuan. Of all the hill people of North Indochina the Meo are the most numerous though they only live on the very summits of the high mountains. The Meo are met with in all the provinces of Laos down to Kham Muan and in northernmost Vietnam. Outside of this area the Meo are also found in Northern Siam and even the Shan States. Their largest settlement is on the limestone outcrop called Phu Pha Vi, about 40 kilometres east of Luang Phrabang. About 30 years ago there existed another large Meo settlement on the plateau of Keng Khoai in the province of Chieng Khwang which numbered some 30,000 souls.

5. *Vide* W.W. Cochrane, *The Shans*, pp. 122-124.

6. Luang Boribhan Buriphan,

E. Seidenfaden, "The White Meo," *JSS*, vol. XVII, Part 3.

The Meo are formidable destroyers of forests through their slash - and - burn cultivation which is going to end with catastrophic results for the cultivation of the river valleys. The Meo people all live at heights above 1,000 meters, preferably at heights of 1,200 meters, i.e., above the winter clouds. The Meo cannot stand the climate of the hot and moist river valleys. After having finished business at the market places in the valleys they return the same day to their mountain fastnesses.

The Meo breed excellent ponies which climb the steep hills like goats. Meo horses reach a height of 1.30 to 1.55 meters. They are hardy animals which can cover as many as 100 kilometers in one day over narrow and steep hill paths. Other domestic livestock are fine pigs, bullocks and poultry.

The Meo are proud and independent, and once they become one's friend they are very faithful. Meo girls are often very attractive in their picturesque dresses, perhaps the most picturesque of all the costumes of the hill people. They are comely with a clear skin and often have regular features. The women wear large silver colliers around their necks. The late distinguished prehistorian, Dr. Madeleine Colani, opined that the pictures of the sun appearing on these colliers may point to a former sun cult. The Meo men folk are generally of middle height and finely built. They are some of the most hardy of all the mountaineers of Indochina. They can walk and climb all day in these precipitous hills without feeling tired, and though they may use both horses and oxen as pack animals they themselves can carry heavy burdens. A man will carry a load most of the distance but once in sight of the market place he will shift the burden to his wife so as to be able to show that he is the lord. His love for his family as well as the way he cares for his animals, all go to characterize the Meo. He is the born hunter, and even children are known to have killed tigers with their clumsy, homemade guns. Though scattered over vast stretches of Northern Indochina until only 10 years ago, all the various settlements recognized one superior chief. His name was M'Blé Giao, and he was the blood brother of Colonel Roux.

