

## SHAMANS AND REBELS: THE BATCHAI (MEO) REBELLION OF NORTHERN LAOS AND NORTH-WEST VIETNAM (1918-21)

A largely misrepresented ethnic minority, the Meo<sup>1</sup> have most recently drawn the attention of outsiders – social workers, international civil servants and journalists among others – as a concomitant of the refugee exodus from Indochina in the post 1975 period. Similarly, as both protagonists and victims in the Second Indochina war and as objects of the post-revolutionary social restructuring of Indochina, the Meo as a minority have been consistently treated by state actors down through history as a problem group worthy of administrative or worse military attention. They have seldom been beneficiaries of informed sympathy much less admiration.

How then did this people whose origins lie in China – some would contend, central Asia – come to be historically inserted in the northern salient of the Indochinese peninsula? What relationships did the Meo enter into with the host populations at the frontiers of their southward thrusting migrations across southwest China, northwest Vietnam (Tonkin) and northern Laos? How did this nomadic people react in their first confrontation with the modern world, namely that contingent upon the entry of Laos and Tonkin – as French colonial protectorates – into a broader world system?

Thus in this article on the 'Batchai' (Meo) rebellion of 1918-1921 – which at its high point tied down units of crack colonial troops over an expanse of 40,000 square kilometres spanning northern Laos and northwest Vietnam – we seek to throw light on these questions, while acknowledging that the answers might best be addressed by Meo researchers themselves.<sup>2</sup> But in the absence of written Meo testimonies and without the fruits of official Lao and Vietnamese scholarship on

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1. Known as the Miao in China and H'mong in Laos, for reasons of consistency we have adopted here the colonial-era nomenclature 'Meo'.
  2. Implied here is the advantage that oral history would afford. Prominent among native Meo (H'mong) researchers are Gar Y. Lee and Yang Dao.

Meo history forthcoming, we have turned to the archives of the principal adversaries of the rebels, the colonial military.<sup>3</sup> However biased these records may appear as a primary source, there remains little in the way of a substitute.

As a minimum, then, we hope that this study can contribute towards an emerging picture of the Meo as an independent race with distinctive material culture as well as traditions and which therefore might serve to stimulate and strengthen those Meo of the diaspora in the US, France, Australia and even French Guyana in their struggle against adversity. Likewise those Meo living under communist political systems can only look back with awe at the activities of their forebears in Laos and Vietnam in their conflict with the colonial State over questions of rights and tax justice.

As one French observer writing in 1919 noted of the revolt of the Meo chieftain Batchai and his followers – sometimes described in the colonial literature as a '*Geurre de Fou*' – it should be viewed with reference to three interrelated aspects. These are, firstly, the repercussions of events in China. Secondly, the excesses of the Tai mandarins belonging to the family of Deo Van Tri in their dealings with the Meo. Thirdly, the pressure applied by Meo sorcerers (shamans) and their chiefs.<sup>4</sup> Indeed, in giving consideration in the following pages to such specific dimensions of the revolt, it is here argued that no analysis of Meo revolt – otherwise often subsumed under the rubric 'millenarian' – which fails to take into consideration historical, ethno-political as well as religious factors would be complete.

### The Political-Historical Setting

Broadly viewed, the irruption of French imperial power in northern Indochina in the latter decades of the nineteenth century was doubly destabilizing. On the one hand, Annamite and Tonkinese opponents to French pretensions in this part of Asia, sought sanctuary in northern Kwangsi and Kwangtung provinces of China (and Laos) from where they sought to requisition arms and ammunition to

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3. In Lao and Vietnamese historiography Batchai (Patchay) is treated as a patriotic hero in the struggle against French colonialism. While the Vietnamese, particularly, have been active in promoting researches into Meo ethnography, to my knowledge no detailed study of the Batchai revolt from an historical or sociological perspective has yet appeared in these two countries. However, on the basis of my research in France, it would seem that certain colonial reports bearing upon the revolt are among documents not repatriated to the metropolitan country from Hanoi.

4. Le Service Historique des Troupes de Marine (SHTM), Versailles, Indochine 3PCX1 353F. 'As du mouvement Meo de Lai Chau et Sonla', Saint Chaffray to the Governor General. Hanoi, 10 February 1919

mount their resistance. Nor was the French annexation of Tonkin fully accepted by China, a traditional regional hegemonic power. As an interested US diplomatic observer wrote in 1889, the Chinese Viceroy, Chang Chih-tang, took no measures to prevent violations of French territory mounted from southwest China by Black Flag bands:<sup>5</sup> Indeed it was one of these bands led by Deo Van Tri and his Yunnanese allies, known in Laos as the Ho, which in June 1887 attacked and sacked Luang Prabang, the seat of the Lao monarchy, then under Thai protection. It was on this occasion that the French 'conquistadora', Auguste Pavie, otherwise remembered in colonial legend as the 'conqueror of hearts' rendered personal support to the King of Luang Prabang and thus gained himself and France an ally. In the same year the French launched a military expedition up the Black River from Hanoi in an attempt to suppress Deo Van Tri and his Ho allies. However it was not until 1888 that Pavie arrived in Tai heartland of Sip Song Chau Tai and successfully negotiated an alliance with undisputed overlord of the Tai country.<sup>6</sup>

As revealed in a French colonial memo, Deo Van Tri was originally from a family of Chinese origin which had declared itself Tai. Such was the patrimonial basis of rule in traditional Tai political systems that Tri managed to ensure that all important bureaucratic positions in his 'mandarinate' were held by relatives. As a consequence, he was able to extend his influence not only throughout the highlands of northwest Tonkin, the heartland of the Tai country, but also across the frontier with Yunnan. The French argued that any concessions to the Tai sense of autonomy and tradition was only to be regarded as an indispensable administrative compromise during a transitional period until colonial hegemony could be firmly established. It follows that considerable tact on the part of the European power was required in dealing with the 'feudal' Tai overlord if they were not to completely alienate his clansmen.<sup>7</sup> Indeed, as the American diplomatic observer remarked with prescience, the Tonkin question in general remained a 'most disturbing element in

5. Charles Derby, 'Legation of the US, Peking, January 28, 1889 to Thomas F. Bayard,' Secretary of State, Washington, No.807, Document No.107, J.David (ed), *American Diplomatic and Public Papers: The United States and China*, Series III, 1861-1893, Vol. I, The French China War, II, Scholarly Resources Inc., Wilmington, Delaware, 1979

6. For details of successive French military campaigns waged against the Black Flags, Annamite rebels and their Yunnanese allies between 1883-85 in the lower Black river region see *Journal des Debats*, 14 October 1883, 15 April 1884 and *Journal le Temps*, 23 December 1883 and other relevant editions.

And for a more broadguaged study of the historical setting, see D.Marr, *Vietnamese Anticolonialism: 1885-1925*, University of California Press, Berkeley, 1971, pp. 46-47

7. Saint Chaffray Report, op.cit.

French politics'. France, he inferred, was struck with a paradox. It could hardly abandon the place without a blow to national pride, but to hold it involved enormous cost, 'a graveyard ...without compensating commercial results'.<sup>8</sup>

To further set the Batchai revolt in perspective it is pertinent to survey the relevant antecedent events in China. While a recorded history of Meo rebellion against central authority in China goes back to antiquity, there is no consensus amongst modern historians as to detail even concerning those uprisings which occurred with some frequency during Ming and Ch'ing times. Agreement does exist, however, as to the ferocity with which the Meo rebels were suppressed. Citing Chinese texts, S.Y. Teng notes that in 1728 Emperor Yung-Cheng adopted a policy of converting aborigines to Chinese citizenship. In practice, military colonizers who followed Chinese officials into the Kweichow-Hunan borderlands, thus substituting indirect rule by local officials over the Meo for oppressive direct rule, managed to completely alienate the Meo. The same author mentions revolts of the Meo welling up in 1733, 1735-6 and 1795-1806. An eighteen year revolt which stirred the Meo of Kweichow between 1855 and 1872 was attributed to a too rapid increase in taxes brought down during the Taiping rebellion. Thus in 1855 the Meo of Kweichow rose up against their Chinese oppressors demanding a permanent cancellation of heavy taxes and a restoration of confiscated land. Tang relates that not only did the Meo anxiously follow the progress of the Taipings but cooperated with them in certain military manoeuvres in northern Kweichow. If short of genocide, this author remarks, the devastation of Meo hamlets and towns 'must have been terrific'.<sup>9</sup> Tapp adds that 20,000 Imperial troops were required to quell what he describes as the last great rebellion of the Meo of Guizhou in 1856.<sup>10</sup> It should also be recalled that in 1853 the Meo of south-west China found themselves allies of Yunnanese Muslims themselves in revolt against the centre.<sup>11</sup>

In the event it seems clear that the migration southwards by the Meo was triggered by the excesses of agents of Imperial China. Mottin notes that the first Meo began arriving in Tonkin in the early 1800's. Soon after they carried their revolt to the plains of Tonkin where in 1860 they were turned back by Vietnamese

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8. Charles Derby, *op.cit.*

9. S.Y. Teng, *The Taiping Rebellion and the Western Powers*, Rainbow-Bridge, Taipei, 1971. pp.366-370

10. see N.Tapp, 'The Relevance of Telephone Directories to a Lineagebased Society', *Journal of Siam Society*, Vol.70, 1982, p.118 which draws together numerous sources bearing on the history of Meo revolt in China.

11. J. Mottin, *History of the H'mong*, Odeon, Bangkok, 1980, pp.32-48

elephant brigades.<sup>12</sup> In an early period other Meo groups arrived at the end of their southward march in Hainan Island.

As a subsequent generation of colonial administrators discovered, political action in the high country of Tonkin and Laos was determined as much by its ethnic make up as by the nature of ethnic and interethnic political hierarchies. Newly arrived White and Black Meo in the region were obliged to reach a *modus vivendi* with the White Tai of the Black River and the upper Song Ma river (which traverses Laos) as well as with the Black Tai of Dien Bien Phu and Son La. At the same time, however, as an outside witness reported, the Kha of the region were 'shamelessly exploited' by both the Tai and the Meo, while the Yao (Man) made common cause with the Meo against the French.<sup>13</sup>

Nevertheless, the original Meo settlers in Xieng Khouang who infiltrated into Laos via Tonkin, accepted the tutelage of the Phouan (Lao) princes who ruled the region. It appears that the Phouan granted local administrative rights to the immigrants wherever they formed compact settlements. Thus Meo Kaitong or chiefs were elected to head the great Meo families who settled in the Nong Het region of Laos. For instance, the Lo, Ly, Yang, Vang and Moua clans were each ruled by their respective Kaitong, while lesser families were ruled by lower ranking Photong, Chone Kone and Xaophay. Bonds of reciprocal loyalty were cemented between the Phouan and the Meo with the latter supplying tribute to the former while the lords of the land (the Phouan) offered protection. But it was not until after the first Meo uprising in Laos in 1896 – for whatever reason – that the French authorities accepted the nomination in Xieng Khouang of a Meo Chief (Kaitong) to a position analogous with that of Tasseng (the lowest colonial administrative unit reserved for Lao)<sup>14</sup> Thus where the Meo had arrived at a *modus vivendi* with the traditional feudal overlords in the pre-colonial period, by the turn of the century they were obliged to renegotiate their social contract with the new force on the horizon, the colonial state.

### **The Batchai Revolt as an Anti-mandarinal Affair**

The first hint of major unrest by the Meo of northern Indochina came to

12. *ibid.*

13. SHTM Indochine 3PCX1353, 'Rapport de Dorey sur les operations du detachement du Laos pendant l'hiver 1920-1921 et sur la pacification de la region de la province de Luang Prabang' Hanoi, 5 June 1921

14. Yang Dao, *Les Hmong du Laos face au developement*, Editions Siasavath, Vientiane, 1975, pp.45-48

the attention of colonial administrators in 1918. A revolt of the Meo of Muong La was triggered by the arrest of a Meo sorcerer and his followers by Yunnanese mandarins. In retaliation for this action, Meo warriors armed with primitive weapons attacked Muong Tinh on 31 January, killed the mandarins and burnt the town. With morale and power boosted by the capture of some modern rifles, the rebel Meo proceeded to declare themselves 'independent'. Splitting into two groups, one headed for Muong La and another to Doung Xiang, attacking on 8 February. For the rest of the month, armed conflict raged between Chinese regulars, Tai partisans armed by the mandarins and the Meo of the border region. What began as an anti-Chinese revolt had by this point taken on an anti-Tai dimension as well. By the end of February, the Meo were repulsed from their strongholds in Na Phat and Muong La by armed reinforcements. According to colonial rapporteurs the repression of this Meo rebellion by both the Chinese and the Tai mandarins was 'cruel and violent'. Summary executions provoked a minor exodus of women, children and elderly to Tonkin. While the Meo of Tonkin had only participated in the rebellion on an individual basis they nevertheless accepted refugees from the zone of conflict into their ranks.<sup>15</sup>

News of the repression of the revolt quickly travelled to the Meo of Lai Chau, Sonla and Yen Bay in Tonkin. Indeed, within months the Meo in the region neighboring Muong La, then Lai Chau and Sonla began to display the first signs of agitation. By June, the Meo of Quynh Nhai, Lai Chau and Thuah (Sonla) were on the point of rebellion. In the Dien Bien Phu region the Meo, already in revolt, were energetically repressed by the local Tai mandarins. In Quynh Nhai, as colonial observers reported, sorcerers and other 'agitators' found fertile ground.<sup>16</sup> To be sure it would not have been the first time in the history of Meo rebellion that a sorcerer or shaman appeared at a moment of crisis. Indeed it might be hypothesised that typically sorcerers appear to the Meo at moments of crisis rather than the obverse, that the crisis arises after the appearance or apparition of a sorcerer or shaman.

Rules set down by the French relating to tax collection inhibited, but did not prevent, the Tai mandarins from collecting illicit profits, not acknowledged as contributions to the budget but as personal tribute. The crop growing and cattle raising Meo who populated the mountain heights in an otherwise complex pattern of ethnic distribution, were the most obvious and proximate victim of the Tai tax

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15. Saint Chaffray report, *op.cit.*

16. *ibid.*

collectors although, as stated, the Yao and other minorities did not escape their clutches. Tai peasants, on the other hand, paid a relatively smaller amount of tribute to their lords.<sup>17</sup> Indeed, according to the testimony of a Meo rebel leader cited in an historical survey of the Meo authored by Larteguy and Yang Dao, both the Tai and the Meo tax collectors sheltered behind the French administration. After harvest time, each adult Meo had to remit to the Tai collectors five Indochinese piastres or 200 grammes of opium, two or three times that required by the French. Sanctions for non-compliance were severe.<sup>18</sup>

Thus while the Meo rebellion of Quynh Nhai appeared to be attributable to the events that transpired in China and to the excesses inflicted by the Tai mandarins of Lai Chau, as indicated, there was also a messianic element involved. This was confirmed on 11 June when the word was spread that a king had appeared, calling upon the Meo to abandon their rice fields and to join with 'he' who had the power to provide rice. Several Meo families left for Quynh Nhai. Towards the end of June, a Meo woman given to hysterics was proclaimed queen by her followers. She attracted adepts and received homage from the local Meo clan. The incident had further repercussions in Quynh Ninh and on the Ta Rhing plateau. In spite of the messianic element, however, colonial observers were not so obtuse as to fail to perceive the underlying political dimension of the affair.<sup>19</sup>

To stay the hand of the rebels in this first major uprising by the Meo in colonial times, the French authorities promised the Meo of Quynh Nhai that they would examine their grievances against the Tai notables if they returned to their abandoned fields. In the event, the French arrested three leaders of the movement, including a Meo chief and a sorcerer, and removed them to Lai Chau. The Meo replied that at 'no price' would they continue to subordinate themselves to the Tai authorities and in particular to Deo Van Khang, the eldest son of Deo Van Tri who, upon the latter's death, replaced him as feudal overlord of the Tai. Rather they wanted direct access to the French administration in order to escape from the 'extortions on life and property' imposed by the Tai. Fearing that the French would remove the Meo from Tai authority and that they would lose their windfall profits, the Deo did everything possible to counteract the proposed changes and to prevent the implementation of a new code of inter-ethnic relations.<sup>20</sup>

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17. *ibid.*

18. J.Larteguy and Yang Dao, *La Fabuleuse Aventure du Peuple de Opium*, Presse de la Cité, 1979, p.97

19. Saint Chaffray report, *op.cit.*

20. *ibid.*

On 15 August the Meo complained of a raid by armed Tai led by a cousin of the Quang Deo of Lai Chau, Deo Van Khang, in the Nam Lai valley. This provoked a group of Meo from Dien Bien Phu to rise in revolt on 30 October. They threatened communication lines between Sonla and Lai Chau, repulsed a French patrol and put the village of Muong Phang to the torch. Led by a then unknown chief named Batchai, 300 Meo warriors looted and burnt hamlets in the precincts of Dien Bien Phu. A dozen Tai were killed in the fray and the *tirailleurs* (colonial troops) were summoned from Yen Bay. Despite negotiations entered into by French officials and Batchai, the rebel chief revealed himself as beyond redemption. On 5 December the Delegate of Dien Bien Phu was killed by Batchai's warriors while en route to continue discussions with the Meo chief.<sup>21</sup>

Described by a French military official as an 'epileptic' and a 'sorcerer', Batchai was originally from the Dien Bien Phu region. Although his family had been imprisoned during the earlier uprising, Batchai was released. At this juncture he declared himself a *Chaofa* or messiah in line with a widely held Meo belief in a returning Meo king or saviour.<sup>22</sup> According to Larteguy and Yang Dao, Batchai's overall pretension was to bring peace and prosperity to the Meo and to establish a 'great royal, independent kingdom of the Meo'.<sup>23</sup> Not surprisingly, perhaps, the colonial record of the time reveals no such positive estimation of the Meo chief's 'political' program.

### The Batchai Revolt as an Anti-colonial Affair

With the intervention of the colonial military, Batchai's rebellion could no longer be construed as solely an anti-mandarin affair. After rebel activity was reported among the Meo of Long He (Chau of Thuan) bordering on Dien Bien Phu, the French entered the rebellion on the side of repression. Batchai was attacked in the fortified village of Ban Nam Nghan on 12 October by the *tirailleurs*. While his group suffered heavy losses, Batchai himself managed to escape in the direction of Sonla, where he took refuge with Meo rebels in the Chau of Thuan. On 27 December, several Tai villages were attacked by another Meo chief, the so-called King Camxu of Long He. Although the revolt was not generalised in this Chau, the rebels nevertheless succeeded in terrorising the population. While Camxu was deserted by his partisans following a fierce exchange with the *tirailleurs* in his

21. *ibid.*

22. SHTM, Versailles, Indochine 3PCX1 353, 'Rapport du Colonel Angeli sur sujet des operations entreprises dans le Haut Laos contre les Meos', n.d.

23. Larteguy and Yang Dao, *op.cit.* p.99

mountain redoubt, Batchai's band of fifty went from strength to strength.<sup>24</sup>

Although Meo groups from Muong Sai and Muong Ngoi in Laos deserted their villages to join the rebels in Dien Bien Phu, the first people in Laos to be influenced by rumours of events in Tonkin were the Yao. Indeed in early 1919 the Yao prophesied or at least made it known to certain Lao that within a year or two, a messiah would appear who would lead them to happier regions. Accordingly they would turn over to the Lao their crops, flocks and houses.<sup>25</sup>

Continuing through 1920, Batchai managed to extend his rebellion over a triangular section of territory covering 40,000 square kilometres. Taking Dien Bien Phu as the apex of the triangle, its base was an east-west line located 150 kilometres north of Vientiane. The western side of the triangle was the valley of Nam Ou while the eastern side was a line between Sam Neua and Cua Rau. When eventually pushed back by the military from Xiang Khouang and Hua Phan, Batchai consolidated his position in the Pou Chom Chick-Pou Chom Chang region, where he constructed his citadel in Phoi Loi, north of Muong Hiem. Seen as a natural fortress by the colonial forces, Batchai's redoubt was located at 1000 metres altitude in an area where visibility was reduced to several metres by thick forest, and where the terrain clearly favoured the guerrilla. One of the largest military expeditions assembled in colonial Indochina up until that time – and certainly the largest in Laos by that date – was mounted to break Batchai's rebellion; four companies of *tirailleurs* were brought in from other parts of Indochina to restore order.<sup>26</sup>

As far as the rebels were concerned, the local population were either for the rebellion or they were against it. In the case of dissenters, their villages were set on fire and the inhabitants massacred or led off into captivity. Given these circumstances it was not surprising that nearly all the villages in the rebel zone joined the cause. The clan and lineage structure of Meo society made it imperative that Batchai win over the Meo chiefs if his rebellion was to sustain its momentum and succeed. We know little of Batchai's political program except that it was both anti-Lao (or Tai) and anti-France. Although the Meo are not generally literate, Batchai apparently succeeded in disseminating 'propaganda' tracts which his adepts took to have fallen from heaven.<sup>27</sup>

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24. Saint Chaffray report. op.cit.

25. Archives Outre Mer (AOM). Aix-en-Provence, Laos E16 1st tri. 1919

26. *ibid.* and Dorey report. op.cit.

27. I. Alleton. 'Les Hmong aux confins de la Chine et du Vietnam: la revolte du Fou (1918-1922)' in Pierre Brocheux (ed). *Histoire de Asie du Sudest: Révoltes, Réformes, Révolutions*, Lille, Presses Universitaires de Lille, 1981, p.13

Batchai's success in extending his rebellion so rapidly in Laos was attributed by the French to the assistance rendered by his relative, the Soung Quan (a Meo honorific) of Hoi Thong. Likewise the Song Quan of Phou Gni and the Song Quan of Hoi Thong joined with Batchai and his *chef de guerre*, the Soung Quan of Lao Vang. Notable Meo dissenters from Batchai's cause, however, were the Phya Sai Meo and the Soung Quan Lao Meng, chiefs from the periphery of the rebel zone.<sup>28</sup>

All the Kha villagers in the rebel zone either capitulated or fled in the face of rebel attack. Those who remained were reduced to slavery; women were 'guarded' in their villages while men were conscripted as coolies either to work on the construction of defensive structures for the Meo or to act as their emissaries. Rumour of impending Meo attack served to make most Lao evacuate their villages and flee ahead of the marauding bands. Those Lao on the western perimeter of the rebel zone fled to the other side of the Nam Ou where they re-established their *ray* (gardens), while those Lao of the high valleys of the Nam Soung and the Nam Seng were forced – as refugees – to forage for food in the forest following the destruction of their houses and the plunder of their harvests and cattle.<sup>29</sup>

While some of the French experts of the day thought that only the capture of Batchai would permit the revolt to be neutralised, others surmised that even then a new sorcerer-shaman would appear to take his place. As it happened, one emulator of Batchai sought to pass himself off as a Chaufa. This person went from village to village announcing that he had received a mission from heaven to deliver his compatriots from the Tai domination and that a king would come to place himself at the head of the mountain peoples. Just as his propaganda was beginning to attract followers, he was arrested by the authorities in Tran Ninh.<sup>30</sup>

Despite Batchai's wearing guerrilla tactics and command over the mountain peaks, his movement began to fragment in the face of the French repression. Alleton describes internal dissensions between Meo clans as a contributing factor in Batchai's isolation. By the time of his death, practically all the Meo had capitulated and even began to pay taxes again.<sup>31</sup> Batchai was killed by pro-French Kha on 17 November 1922 in the Muong Ngai region in Luang Prabang. At that point his first lieutenant, Phya Chan, surrendered and swore his loyalty to king and country (and

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28. *ibid* and AOM Aix Laos E16, Luang Prabang, 4th tri 1919

29. *ibid*.

30. AOM Aix Laos E16, Luang Prabang, 2nd tri 1919

31. Alleton, *op.cit.* p.36

France) by praying at a (Buddhist) pagoda. Following the capture of Lao Sing, another of Batchai's lieutenants, the 'pacification' of the region was seen as practically terminated and the withdrawal of occupation forces was then envisaged.<sup>32</sup>

That the revolt did not take on a more general and permanent character could be attributed to the fact that not all the Meo joined in. Clearly Batchai was unable to convince or intimidate all Meo chiefs into believing that he was the 'true' Chaofa. Others may have had a better estimation of French military capabilities or a different estimate of French rule. For instance, although the Meo of Muong Sai and Hongsa were worked over by Batchai's propagandists, they proved unwilling participants in the rebellion. According to information supplied by Phya Sai, a pro-French Meo chief, the Soung Quan Song was a reluctant participant in the rebellion. His village had been occupied by Batchai's White Meo guerillas as a reprisal for not supplying conscripts to the rebel cause.<sup>33</sup> Supply was also a major problem for the Meo and their adversaries alike, although the French eventually succeeded by the tactic of cutting major trails leading to Batchai's redoubt. Indeed, stricken by shortages on Phoi Loi, the rebels had to be supplied by caravans dispatched from Dien Bien Phu by their clansmen.<sup>34</sup>

### Interpretations

While not ignoring political motives of the rebels, namely the struggle of the Meo through history to seek autonomy, the French Catholic missionary and Meo specialist, Savina, echoed in his writings the arguments of many colonial observers by giving credence to the irrational element in Meo behaviour. According to Savina, the Meo are waiting for a liberator or a king – *phoa thay* – just as the Jews are waiting for a messiah. What we call revolt, he continues, they call *oa phoa thay* or king-making. It is by the shamans that a Meo 'sorcerer' is named and empowered. The shamans are the source of prayers-magic and such paraphernalia as amulets to ensure vulnerability against the enemy. With equanimity, however, he concludes that in Meo political cosmography, religion is used as a weapon to win

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32. AOM Aix Laos E17 'Report to the Governor General', Vientiane, 10 January 1919

33. AOM Aix Laos E17, 4th tri 1919

34. AOM Aix Laos E17, 2nd tri 1919

political freedom.<sup>35</sup>

While the actual extension of the revolt into Laos was clearly the work of Batchai, there was only belated introspection on the part of colonial officials as to broader interpretative questions relating to ethnic minority questions. As one official remarked during the course of the military suppression campaign:

‘...it is essential to know whether the seed sown by Batchai will fall on ground prepared to receive it and favourable to its germination and development’.

He continued:

We have been twenty five years in the Meo country and we don't know a word of their language, we are unable to have interpreters, nor (Meo) schools, military (conscripts) or administrators...no study of the Meo exists...The Meo say, ‘we don't see you’.

The same official advocated a policy of greater contact with the Meo as well as an attempt to understand them. The suppression of Tai and Lao trading intermediaries he viewed as the sine qua non of any attempt to remove abuses.<sup>36</sup>

On a similar theme, the administrator, de Barthelemy, observed that the process of centralisation of administration in Laos pursued under the colonial order, merely reinforced the subordination of the non-Lao peoples to the dominant Lao.

‘Laos seems to be administratively organised as if it was inhabited only by the Lao. The regulations were Lao, the mandarins were also Lao and the Provincial Council – embryo of the future Consultative Chamber – never included a representative of the mountain races. Unconsciously we have, through this spirit of centralisation, created an aristocracy of peoples, but what unconscious misery for the races of second rank, who can only approach us with difficulty.’<sup>37</sup>

35. F.M.Savina, *Histoire des Miao*, Imprimerie de la Société des Missions Etrangères, Hong Kong, 1924, p.259 and Tapp, op.cit. p.115

Indeed, Meo shamanism has been the subject of one major study. see G. Morechand, ‘Principaux traits du chamanisme meo blanc en Indochiné’, *Bulletin de Ecole Françaises de Extrême Orient*, XLV11-2 pp.509-546

According to the dictionary definition, viz. *Websters*, Third New World Dictionary, shamanism is a religion that is characterised ‘...by the belief that the unseen world of gods, demons, and ancestral spirits is responsive only to shamans’.

36. Angeli's Report, op.cit.

37. Marquis P.de Barthelmy, *Le Laos*, Plon, 1898, p.139-40

Another administrator, Roux, put the blame at the feet of the local Lao chiefs – ‘very lazy, very rapacious’ – who treated the Meo as ‘milch cows’. If the warrior spirit of the Meo sometimes welled up, he pointed out, then it was for very good reasons, notably crushing taxes, illegal requisitions and opium.<sup>38</sup>

Contrary to Alleton’s assertion, we have no evidence that abuse of the opium trade was a major cause of Batchai’s revolt,<sup>39</sup> although control over opium was the central issue with respect to a revolt by Chinese ‘republicans’ which raged through northern Laos in 1914. That is not to say, however, that the last of the Black Flag bands which, as seen above, terrorised northern Indochina at various times over the past half century were entirely uninterested in profiting from Batchai’s rebellion. Firstly, Yunnanese sought to take advantage of the turmoil in northern Laos and the Fourth Military Region of Tonkin to purchase low price opium. Secondly, the Yunnanese caravaners entered Laos with the intention of selling guns to the insurgent Meo. At Muong Sen, 150-200 Chinese smugglers living in close contact with the Meo were taken as common enemies of the French, all the more so as – incongruously – they brazenly displayed German military pictures.<sup>40</sup>

### Sequels

As a sequel to the revolt, rebel chiefs were summarily executed by the authorities and their collaborators were made to pay compensation to the victims of their rampage. In defense, the Meo responded that they ‘were mad and possessed by the devil’ and, by inference, not responsible for their actions. If there was an irrational motive for the revolt, the French did not accept a prima facie case for the diminution of culpability. Observing that the Meo had great reserves of money and were blessed with a good opium harvest, the colonial government established a committee for each *muong* comprising three Meo, three Lao and one Vietnamese to determine the collective guilt of each Meo clan and the amount of compensation to

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38. Roux cited in Larteguy and Yang Dao, op.cit.

39. cf. Alleton, op.cit.

40. Dorey’s report, op.cit.

be paid.<sup>41</sup> Suggested criteria for indemnity were set at fifty piastres for every Lao or Vietnamese killed, not including compensation for loss of houses, cattle and crops.<sup>42</sup> Acting as government agents, the Banque de l'Indochine collected a total of 375 kilograms of silver from the Meo, worth, however, only 7000 piastres due to the dubious quality of the silver.<sup>43</sup>

In order to preempt a recurrence of rebellion in the highlands the local French administration commissioned an enquiry to ascertain the abuses to which the Meo were subject and set forth guiding principles for the more equitable administration of these people. This task befell Father Savina. Duly drawn up and with the best intentions, the statute proclaimed that the Meo should not be subordinate to any other races in the administrative hierarchy, but like Lao or Vietnamese should administer themselves, 'under the surveillance of the Protectorate'. To this end a census was to be taken of the Meo by tribe and habitat. A new territorial delineation of the cantons and communes was to be drawn up 'with care and precision'. All the Meo of Tonkin and Laos were to be invited to 'freely' elect their own tribal chiefs, one each per province, per military territory, per canton and a mayor for each commune. Elections were to take place, not in the main towns but in the villages under the guidance of an official and according to majority vote. Taxes were to be required to the French administration 'in the presence of all the chiefs of the canton and all the assembled mayors'. Subject to French approval, Meo customary law was to be binding upon them. For the first time under the French administration of Laos, Meo chiefs would be authorised to adjudicate intra-Meo disputes, although fines were to be paid to the French authorities. Contrariwise, Meo chiefs would be responsible for those they administered and were to furnish yearly political reports on their *muong*.<sup>44</sup>

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41. AOM Aix Laos F6, 'telegram from Vientiane', 2nd bureau, 26 August 1920

Although we have no evidence, one should not ignore the contention of inter alia Tapp op.cit. p.122, that missionary groups such as the China Inland Mission served to 'lend ideological support to an essentially sociopolitical form of alienation'. Indeed, according to *one* missionary memoir, S.R. Clarke, *Among the Tribes in South-west China*, China Inland Mission, London, MCMXI (Ch'eng Wen Publishing Co., Taipei, 1970), it was not until 1896 that definite efforts were made to evangelize among the Meo of Kweichow, Mission activity was expanded to Yunnan in 1905 and by 1909 the Society claimed tens of thousands of converts among the Meo.

Whether or not the ideology of the Taiping rebels permanently influenced Meo behaviour in their contact with outsiders down through the decades remains an open question, however.

42. AOM Aix Laos F6, 'telegram', 11 February 1920

43. AOM Aix Laos F6, 'Governor to Director of Finances, Hanoi', Vientiane, 26 August 1920

44. Savina. op.cit. np.

Some five years after Batchai's revolt was crushed, the Meo 'tribes' of Luang Prabang, Tran Ninh and Sam Neua were reportedly 'peaceful' and in excellent esprit de corps. This felicitous state of affairs was attributed to the implementation of the new administrative measures including the constitution of autonomous Meo groups under elected chiefs and directly responsible to French Commissioners.<sup>45</sup> But because of past grievances as well as continuing clan conflict, as much as new burdens imposed by the colonial state – especially in the way of corvee and tax demands – Meo discontent was always simmering and barely constrained throughout the entire colonial era.

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45. AOM Aix Laos. D6, 'Rapport au Conseil de Gouvernement', 1926