



**The Pretty-Vial family and the two
Lao ladies in our life: Tholanii (the
concrete one) and Kone**

(* John Yeomans, the tree-in-tree is just out of frame to the
left)

Our life in Lao

The day had progressed poorly from its beginning. As always in the late dry/early wet, it was stinking hot from the outset...then it got hotter. My field site lay a good hour-and-a-half away. Some of the ride is pleasant, especially the ferry ride across the Nam Ngeum River, but most of it is a matter of ensuring you do not come to grief underneath one of the many earth-moving trucks that ply most of the roads within coo-ee of Vientiane, or insert yourself into the rear of one of the two-wheel tractors that crawl along the same roads. I spent most of the day sweating my tits off harvesting maize, under pressure to get finished and back home before dark. Harvest done, I had one last task: to spray fungicide and insecticide on a legume trial nearby. My noble steed, an ageing XL125 of which I am very fond (but only when it goes) ground to a halt about a mile short of the field. It stopped with such finality that my return home looked in peril. It was not starting again then, that's for sure. Tired, hassled and hot, I left the bike next to the road and walked the rest with 20 litres of chemical on my back. Shortly after applying said chemical, it bucketed rain and washed it straight off again: wonderful. I trudged back to the bike; hot, tired and now wet...

Our family has now been in Lao PDR for 16 months; a whole year of wets, dries, humids, holidays, bazaars, deadlines, planning, reporting, etc. I look out the window now at our impossibly-green garden. Especially early in the wet season, the plant life gets that sheen and vigour. I look at the concrete goddess we have installed in the garden; if left to her own devices, she would disappear beneath a tide of vegetation. Overall, we have loved the experience, whether it has loved us is up for debate. Now, like any good PhD thesis, I will discuss the experience in sections.

The climate

In Australia, we left a semi-arid climate (the 'semi' bit is becoming debatable) with annual rainfall of 325 mm ("13 inches *per* year, *perhaps*" as a wise neighbour once told me). We now sit in a sub-tropical climate, with roughly 2000 mm per annum. I suspect not even Ireland would rival that, would it Fintan? It does have its variations in rainfall, both during the year (yes, it is more than possible to get a drought in the midst of a wet season) and from year to year. Last year, for example, was exceedingly wet, especially around August when the Mekong swelled to within inches of flooding large parts of Vientiane. We have become blazé about rain. Last year, our manual rain

gauge hung limp and untended from the fence. Who cares, when it rains nigh-on every afternoon? Now we have a digital weather station that tells us precisely how much we got, then we precisely ignore it. You can understand why rice originated in this part of the world.

Needless to say, in the tropics you learn to cherish your energy and hydration. I did get into some strife at my field sites, as a midday nap is not only nice but compulsory if you work in the heat day after day. My farmer forceably removed me from the field on a couple of occasions and deposited me underneath a fan in his house. With no evaporative cooling to speak of, the odd gust of wind becomes a cherished event.

The people

There is a schmaltzy marketing image of the Lao being very happy, carefree folk who always have a smile regardless of the context. Like most generalizations, that is not strictly true (you should see the bottom-lip drop on a Lao public servant if they are still at work at 4.31 pm!), but it is not far from the truth. They are a genuinely friendly species, even in Vientiane, and generally think the best of you unless you prove otherwise. Considering that is one of the principles of Buddhism, it is not really a surprise. On the flipside, they do not do criticism very well, so when there is a failing to be discussed (including mine), all get very uncomfortable. Enter the 'Asian' way of doing things, where face must be preserved at all costs.

Many, including the early French colonialists, looked down upon the Lao as being lazy and unambitious. At least in a contemporary context, there is no guarantee of retaining hard-earned gains here in Lao. Fate, family, corrupt governance or wider unrest have whisked away many a net worth over the years. I think the development set, or at least John Kenneth Galbraith, call it accommodation; others might call it realism. When combined with a climate that mitigates against manual labour, there is a great deal of logic in a relaxed demeanour. Many betanque rinks here get lots of use at all hours of the day.

We were warned that the Lao will never really let you into their lives. I agree with that, but many have let us a fair way in. Once you can talk about the merits of the Marxist approach to things with some of your colleagues, you are getting somewhere.

Mixing with the ex-pat community has been an experience all of its own. Being a hub for diplomacy, regional business and the development

game, there is a vibrant, albeit transitory ex-pat community here. There are heaps of Aussies, Frenchies, Yanks, Poms, etc. There are also quite a few Russians from Cold War times, but they generally keep to themselves. A good number of ex-pats live their life entirely in Vientiane; between work, school, social functions, they might as well be living at home. To top it off, many of them flee home for some of the wet season, rather than explore the country they live in; odd. I have found it very stimulating interacting with this melting pot of other cultures. Be it sharing Christmas with the Swiss and the Dutch, or sharing the pre-school board with 4 northern European and 2 Thai women, coming to grips with their way of thinking is both a challenge and a delight. My one exception is the Americans. They persist in believing that there is no other truth than their own, which explains why they dig such good holes in which to bury themselves. An example is after the vast expense at dropping millions of tones of explosives on Lao, some of which did not go off and even now represents a huge impediment to the nation, they now spend a huge amount of money trying to exhume and identify fragments of the few hundred airmen who got shot down in the process...40 years ago! Meanwhile thousands of Lao still lose lives and limbs courtesy of Dicky Nixon's initiative to stop the Reds.

The language

Lao is a much simpler language than English in terms of vocabulary. I have lost count of the number of colleagues who have asked me why on earth English has so many words that mean the same thing. If anything, Lao has the opposite problem in that one word can mean different things... would that make Lao poetry better or worse? Singular and plural are the same, likewise noun can often be identical to verb. Efficient it is, but it always needs a context for good comprehension. On top of this, you have the six different tones that completely change the meaning. Hence, the word for 4, can mean colour, future tense or f—k, depending how you say it. The worst is probably “kai”: chicken, egg, near AND far. It is just as well that foreigners are given plenty of leeway for mispronunciation.

I have enjoyed flexing my language muscle. A season out in an English-free maize field has thrust me into proficiency. It is great to pick up a whole new level of detail, and good fun to hear others' comments about you when they think you cannot understand. I followed early advice and can read and write the script. This helps enormously, as phonetics definitely has limits. We have both acquired one skill that will seem obvious to multi-linguists: you can have a torrent of Lao

launched at you, pick up no more than 20 percent, and still manage meaningful communication. Conversation quickly dries-up if you are constantly complaining you do not understand.

The food

There are similar schmaltzy images around that Lao food is diverse, excellent and universally tasty. The former two adjectives stick, the latter does not. In fact the further you get from urban centers, the more pragmatic and earthy the cuisine becomes. If you regard bamboo shoots and offal loaded with chili and bathed in gut contents or a muddy bowl of chili-snails as exciting and exotic, then good for you. Chili is a constant.

The food is very wholesome and generally good for you. It is very rice-based, particularly sticky rice. You get a little rice basket beside you at most meals. I have never eaten so much fresh water fish before. The whole family has settled into a pattern of eating rice porridge – “khao piak khao” – every other morning. It is a great habit, but one you need about an hour to exercise.

Mum, you predicted that I would transform to the chubby in my mid-thirties. Since arriving in Lao, I have lost five kg. The Andrew Watsons of this world would query how you can get any skinnier than ‘runt’, but plain tucker and tropical yakka seem to have done it. For now at least, Mum, you are wrong.

Did I mention it is lychee season? We have gone through armfuls of lychees this month!

The agriculture

Lao farming evolved around a very wet, wet season. This region is a centre of origin for rice, so the astute observer can still see wild relatives in nooks and crannies even now. Certainly there is still a riot of traditional varieties in use even now, but they are gradually losing out to semi-dwarf improved lines that yield more. One of the particular delights is riding a motor-bike in September, when most of the crop flowers and the fragrant varieties are especially fragrant. I am told that enough nutrition arrives with monsoon rainfall (oh, the thunderstorms!) to sustain about 1 t/ha/annum forever. It is not surprising that the yield 100 years ago was about 1 t/ha. Now we have improved it, added fertilizers and pesticides and degraded much of the soil resource in the process. Alas, the image of pristine Asian rice systems delivering rice to you, free of environmental footprint, is long-gone.

The rice system is based on glutinous (sticky) rice, which has nothing to do with gluten. The rice has negligible amylose content, and hence looks and behaves quite different to the rice most western folk see. We love it, especially the shorter members of the family as they can pick it up, throw it around and put in their pocket for later. Gradually, the rice systems are being diversified to grow other things, but rice will long remain the staple.

Most farming is done by very small landholders – 1 ha or less – which makes a mockery of the Australia obsession with magnitude (I meant *farm* size!). On the downside, most never get much past feeding their families, but on the upside they know their farms intimately. They also ensure that their farming is their lifestyle. Hence, farming operations often turn into impromptu parties. I do not think I am being excessively romantic saying that western agriculture has lost much of that and it is poorer for it.

Many of the festivals have agrarian origins, the most notable is the Rocket Festival in April-May. The rockets are sent skywards to seed the clouds and bring the rain. There are phallic connotations, plus an apparent license to cross-dress. The aforementioned concrete goddess in our yard – Tholanii – nourishes the soil with her long hair. See the attached photo for more detail.

World agriculture, particularly silviculture, is finding Lao PDR in a hurry. Chinese rubber and Thai sugar plantations are springing up, eucalypt forests are being planted for timber and there is growing talk about middle-eastern money setting-up large-scale rice growing operations; quite where they plan to do the latter I am not quite sure. There is a bit of the *terra nullius* principle being used, both with respect to the people, the vegetation and the fauna that lives/lived there. There are doubtless gross mis-justices being done in the uplands and the lowlands. This also applies to the plethora hydro-dams being put in. Build the dam, then get as close as possible to lip-service for compensation for those that use to live there.

The academic exercise

Like many, I am finding the twists and turns of a PhD a bit different from what I intended. It is certainly not the straight line of hard work that some may envisage; half the trick is framing the question concisely. Hence, perhaps half the work I have done will never see the light of day, but I believe that is typical for many. You can strategically

pick a field and a topic such that the PhD is predictable and straightforward, but oh how dull! (Rosco, I still feel you are undertaking the more daunting task in philosophy...I thought plant responses were hard to fathom sometimes.)

Importantly, a good half of the motivation for doing a PhD here is to contribute to agricultural R&D at a coal-face level. There is no shortage of folk wishing to pontificate about agricultural development from upon high, generating forests of reports and strategies in the process, but less folk willingly to do dirty stuff. The downside of this approach has been a lowly official status, which means eating lots of humble pie, particularly when I am sandwiched between Australian expectations and Lao outcomes. I can not have it both ways. It has been a joy to contribute in all sorts of little ways, from editing many papers for English glitches (Laoglish is almost as much fun as Chinglish), giving the casting vote to decide the new title for the research centre, collating and analyzing data, morphing into the resident rice herbicide expert, improving tractor-driving skills down in Savannakhet and so on.

Just yesterday I appreciated that despite wasted effort, I can see the path to the finish. That is a good feeling. A large part of getting to the finish seems to be avoiding the detours along the way.

The politics

I told many of you that I looked forward to experiencing a different way of governing a country. With a lack of democracy, there is no obsession with the electoral cycle. Decisions are made arbitrarily and doubtless with the advantage of the elite in mind; refer to the previous discussions about land use change here. What has proved surprising is that we have left a land of endless spin and short-termism and arrived in a land with lots of spin, but probably less short-termism...would that make a Lao version of *The Insiders* more, or less interesting? We are constantly reminded of how wonderful our rulers are, usually associated with targets of some kind (there are still official decrees as to how much rice will be produced!), but it is driven more by the desire to hold power and avoid a major unrest, rather than which marginal seats might be lost next year. Overall it is refreshing, but it is Marxist in name only – much like China – and some very poorly informed decisions do get made if vested interests get the ear of the powerful. Are we any better, though? I think China is showing us all, that one real strength of their system is the ability to think well ahead and force necessary change through without pontificating. Lao PDR is not really showing us that.

On home, family and friends

I miss you folk. I have never been a great cultivator of friends or family, but being apart for so long certainly makes us fonder. I feel a twinge of sadness, especially, when I see the boys growing up without other family around. Thank you to those who have kept in touch; Garry H, Richie, Rossco, Andi S and Sammy Swordfish deserve special mention. Russell R, you even observed the anniversary of our departure; an un-nerving attention to detail.

I have found the decline in weather conditions and water resources at home since I left especially gut-wrenching. Some have quipped that my timing was excellent; perhaps so, but it is probably only supremely excellent if we do not come back! Parts of what we have treasured for so long may not be worthy of treasuring for much longer. I dearly hope the current improvement sticks.

Upon seeing photos of the Australian bush, I do miss that also. Infuriating climate that it is, it has produced some truly elegant flora.

...Upon reaching the bike, I saw that a small umbrella had been placed over my seat to keep it dry. Then, a handful of villagers appeared out of the bushes, explained that they had had a look and the ignition system looked weak for some reason, then successfully push-started the bike. Paul Theroux once said that the best Africans are the ones with the arse out of their pants; I would suggest likewise the Lao.