My one man expedition got off to a shaky start. It's long been my modest crusade to save as much of the software and hardware from South and Southeast Asian minority groups that interest me in museums where a memory of their existence will be safe and saved for posterity (or what's left of it if James Lovelock is right). In the last thirty years I've sadly witnessed the steamroller of Americanization flatten scores of these groups, firing the urgency. Last year I did a survey of the Vientiane to Pakse region, in other words from the Lao capital to the deep south, and found Westernization in full bloom.

Initially, this season I planned to focus on the remote and mountainous region around the Sam Neau, Hua Phan province, region of northeast Laos and to piece together a general ethnological collection from among the hilltribes available - with emphasis on textiles. Laos has between 38 and 123 ethnic groups, depending on who is doing the counting, and this most beautiful of Lao mountain provinces has 22 of them, predominantly Hmong and Mien because of the high elevation they invariably live at. But after landing in Sam Neau, instead of the dusty, provincial town which I expected to find, it rather was a blacktopped, prosperous, bustling burg going modern and with new Toyota land cruisers zipping around! With pavement connecting nearby Vietnam, and a considerable influence from that Asian Tiger, the economy was booming.

Running into a fellow anthropologist who has been working the region for a dozen years, I quizzed him. He reported that he hasn't seen hilltribes wearing their traditional costumes outside of special events for years - and these they "now never" parted with. His report was confirmed when I motorcycled into the back country to visit numerous villages over the next two days, mostly Hmong and Mien (but often difficult to tell because t-shirts have replaced costumes and one has to go by other clues, particularly styles of housing).

The steamrolling modern times were making inroads even into northern Lao.... Some ethnographic material was available in San Neua but almost all at outrageous prices. I managed to pick up two outstanding examples of basketry and a fish trap but that was all. On the positive side, I was relieved to see that the textile industry - and this area is the most renowned in the country - is extremely strong. Indeed, everywhere I investigated, it was in like condition: although the hilltribes (particularly the Hmong, who make the most artistically decorated purely ethnic textiles) rarely now weave their own clothing, they have discovered a market among tourists in the tourist areas of the country. In some villages there was a loom under every home that bore stilts. Noteworthy is that the quality of their tradition material hasn't descended too low from their original heights to feed this market, something all too common with many minority groups; but where their art really shone is in the tradition Lao sin, or sarong, the national Lao dress. That there is this market will continue to give this creative endeavor a healthy outlet.

Forced to change plans, I knew I'd have to do a sweep of northern Lao and this I did, following Route 1 across the north of the country (13.5 hours in a bus with 60 built for 41, actually quite entertaining), stopping in the market town of Nong Khiaw. Here too some material was available but, again, at prices so outrageous I couldn't hide my disgust. I've always found it a far more valuable use of time and money to deal with middlemen; the prices are often just as good, even better, than when I go into a village and barter with my white, wealthy, Western face; and the middlemen (shopkeepers and stall keepers normally) often have a concentration of material and are able to pick up material at prices only they, being indigenous, can barter.

Fearing the expedition was going to be a bust, I moved on Luang Prabang - and hit paydirt! The huge Hmong Night Market had a marvelous assortment of excellent, often used (which I strongly prefer) material. And, fortuitously, I have concentrated on Hmong for twenty-five years and was able to fill out a splendid and comprehensive collection of jewelry, tools, textiles, game items, weapons and fishing gear, even examples of hilltribe red and black rice, in addition to the basketry I'd picked up. Added to our already considerable Hmong holdings, particularly a large brocade and costume collection pieced together in Sapa
in Vietnam in 1995 (and impossible to find today), and with jewelry and large basketry items collected from the mid-1980s on, it forms a formidable collection.

Like all our other substantial documented collections from around South and Southeast Asia, Su and I'll enjoy this one during our lifetimes but it and they will be bequeathed to Canada's Museum of Civilization and Vancouver's Museum of Anthropology, with both of which I have had a relationship since I started collecting for international museums in the late 1970s.

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