Steaming Down the Mekong

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(click on the small image for full screen image with captions.)

I wrote the account that follows a half-century ago, as a light-hearted record of travel on the Mekong River in Laos. Although in 1954–57 I lived in Saigon as the wife of a USAID employee, as an anthropologist I frequently traveled to Laos for research, hitching a ride on one small plane or another to Vientiane, the capital. Once there, I was on my own respecting further travel. Land routes, other than via rivers, were few, but in those days there were many airborne opportunities on the Dakotas (DC3s) or the tiny, single-engine Dragon or Beaver ("Le Bee-vair"), manned by French ex-fighter-pilots and chartered by the various international agencies that then swarmed over the country. One was CARE, a private American relief agency that relied on charters — including Air Laos — for delivery of supplies to the war-ravaged northern provinces abutting China and North Vietnam (figs. 1–2, below). The provincial airstrips were primitive; even the airport in the capital was only a grassy meadow. Like the others, it had to be cleared of livestock for landing. With the doors already wide open, the pilot, well fortified by Algerian wine (a cockpit must-have), simply made a couple of white-knuckled, ground-level passes before swooping in for a faultless landing. There was ample reason to dub the national airline Air Chaos.

Fig. 1

Fig. 2

It was easy to fly out of Vientiane on a CARE delivery mission, unbelted and squatting amidst unsecured boxes of Velveeta (a puzzling exotic taken by Laotians to be soap) but it was less easy to return. The missions were swift and staccato; unload the boxes fast and roar off for another drop or back to the capital. That didn't allow much time for research; as a result I stayed behind, looked around for awhile and then hunted for a way to move on. Sometimes it was through the bush by elephant — one such excursion was memorialized in Oden Meeker's "Don't Forget Madame's Elephant" (*The Saturday Evening Post*, January 14, 1956) — at others on a hill-tribe pony or in a dugout canoe (fig. 4, below). No matter the mode, the eventual terminus of the transport was always the Mekong River, the great arterial highway, carving a three-thousand-mile southward course from Tibetan crags to the South China Sea[1]. On its immense flood it was always possible to find transport of one kind or another. Once I traveled on a wood-fired steamboat.

Unpublished, a 1955 manuscript record of the steamboat trip lay yellowing among my papers as other countries and other projects claimed my attention. Had I not come across recent accounts of traveling the Mekong through Laos, so it would have remained.[2] A dour, broken country of "dark impoverishment" now — so it is described — and of speedboats that rocket down the Mekong "like demented drag-car racers,"[3] it would be a world apart from tranquil Mekong travel and the beguiling land that was Laos fifty years ago. That another generation might share those bygone days seemed reason to revive the paper.[4]

Fig. 4

The *Pavie* was not exactly a trim craft; some might think her dowdy. To appreciate her one had to have experienced alternate means of transport in the Kingdom of Laos. After two months of just that — my own feet, springless jeeps and battered trucks, pony and elephant, dugout canoes and single-engine planes manned by derring-do pilots — I had that in plenty so the *Pavie* seemed quite appealing.

Named for Auguste *Pavie*, an early French colonial luminary, the boat's name surfaced when in ramshackle Vientiane I was searching for a way south (fig. 5, left).[5] Before the just-ended war in Indochina (1946–54), a passable French-built road paralleled the Mekong south of Vientiane, passed through Cambodia, and terminated in Saigon, South Vietnam.[6] The lack of

Fig. 5

maintenance during the war years, however, as well as heavy-duty military traffic and the Viet Minh's systematic destruction of the innumerable bridges, have decommissioned much of the road. My choice was either air or water. Since I was here to see the country I chose the Mekong. But it was quite by chance that I teamed up with the *Pavie*.

While in the dusty little one-room office of the transport company where I booked passage, I expected she would be a low-slung, cargo boat, a *piromoteur* (motorized pirogue, wooden but no longer a dugout) with which I was familiar. Starting from Ban Houei Sai, in Upper Laos, I had negotiated a long reach of the Mekong on one of them, the *Star of Laos II* (figs. 6–8, below). The *Star*'s real business was freighting gasoline and miscellaneous merchandise upriver and returning downriver with strong, black tobacco, cotton, hides, elephant saddles, and a little opium. Passengers, the usual locals or an American lady anthropologist, were just incidental business for the *Star*. There were no concessions to gracious living. Passengers slept side-by-side on a bamboo mat in the hold. If one had a blanket, so much the better, if none, so much the worse for, blanketless, I found it to be cold and fog-shrouded in February. For *Star* travelers, however, there was running water aplenty — thousands of cubic feet of it running by on all sides. For other needs one made one's arrangements according to one's ingenuity and modesty or lack of it.

Fig. 6

Fig. 7

Fig. 8

As for the *Pavie*, when in the early dawn of an October morn I actually made her acquaintance, I realized I had misjudged her. No low-lying, gasoline-motored, cargo boat was the *Pavie*. She was a two-decker, wood-burning, passenger steamboat, the largest, at thirty-seven meters, of three sister ships that for a half-century or more have plied the Mekong (fig. 9, below). The *Pavie*'s run was between Vientiane and Savannakhet, a French colonial town of some importance about five-hundred kilometers downriver. What is more, the *Pavie* boasted two classes of accommodations, second-class space for about four hundred, comparable to the only accommodations on the *Star*, and first class consisting of two cabins. Each cabin had two bunks and, luxury of luxuries, an installed porcelain wash basin with two faucets. I had been assigned to first class without consultation on the presumption, I suppose, that a foreign lady would be more at home there. But there was a catch. Whereas second class passengers slept — men and women alike — on the open deck or in the hold, first class passengers, if traveling alone, slept cooped up with a stranger. Only one of the bunks was mine, it appeared. The other was assigned to someone else. That the "someone" was a man concerned no one except me. This little problem was nicely resolved when my prospective cabin mate became immobilized in Vientiane with a malarial attack. My luck held when an impending festival kept downstream passengers to a minimum, so no substitution was made and even the neighboring cabin remained unoccupied. As for my marvelous porcelain washbasin I soon discovered that it was merely a relay station for the muddy Mekong, pumped into casks on my cabin roof until, overflowing, it dripped through onto my bunk. I was supremely content, however, for I had not only a bunk, but a mattress of sorts, a single sheet, a mosquito net, and a kerosene lamp. And this time I brought a blanket.

Fig. 9

Whether one travels a reach of the Mekong in Upper Laos, such as the *Star*'s run from Ban Houei Sai to Luang Prabang, a middle reach on the *Pavie*, or, farther south, Pakse to Khinak, on the *Pavie*'s sister steamer, the decrepit *Colombert*, there is no better way to savor Laos. The vast river is a vital focus for lowland Lao and even the interior hill tribes descend to travel it and to shop and trade along its banks. Hence any trip on the Mekong provides a fair sample of the country and its people. For two and a half days and four hundred and eighty four kilometers, as we traversed to Savannakhet, I joined the dreamy rhythm of Laotian life spun out slowly in an incomparable setting of broad waters, limitless skies, and mauve-mountained horizons. I saw how Laotians played, how they worked, how they made the best of life and how they suffered. I joined in a wedding, was invited to a reception, and attended a classical play.

The *Pavie* herself probably best illustrates the unhurried pace of Laotian life, "the least urgent souls on earth," as the director of CARE, Oden Meeker, once observed. She was little concerned with schedules: one neither knew the hour or even the day she would leave or much less the time of her arrival. "You understand, Madame," explained the booking clerk in Vientiane, "one loses time...motor breakdowns...*ceci, cela*." It behooved a would-be passenger to frequent the shipping office twice a day for the better part of a week to learn whether the *Pavie* had yet come upstream and, if so, which would be the probable departure day for the downstream run. When the actual departure date and time was finally fixed for 7:00 a.m. on a given day, I was told: "One must arrive early, *vous savez*, because the captain might decide to leave earlier." Raised in the belief that punctuality is one of the virtues, I arrived at the quay sharp at 6:30. It was cold at that hour in October, even in Indochina, and I shivered out the next hour and a quarter until the *Pavie*, shuddering with the effort, hooted a final farewell and grudgingly lurched into the stream. But

no matter, the time had been pleasantly spent in company with a charming gentleman I had encountered strolling the deck and like me, I presumed, waiting on the captain's whim for departure. It came as something of a surprise to learn that the unhurried gentleman was the captain himself.

The real index of the *Pavie*'s pace was her fueling system. A wood-burning, steam-driven craft, her boilers depended on wood purchased from villagers en route. Hand cut in Yule-log-like one-meter lengths, wood came by ox cart through the dense jungle, stacked and restacked by hand at ever-lower levels following the receding waters as the dry season approached. A cubic meter earned the equivalent of a dollar. I was soon to understand why the *Pavie*'s schedule was so casual.

At noon on the first day, lustily announcing our arrival with three long, steamy blasts, we swung to the steep bank to take on the first load of the three hundred to three hundred and fifty cubic meters we would consume until we reached the next fueling station. Lines of wrist-thick, braided rattan lashed us to a convenient bush — or, later, a wooden stake driven into the soft bank. Then six of our crew (there were twenty-one in all), garbed in checkered sarongs and straw hats, fell to stacking the logs one by one on their naked shoulders, trotting barefoot over a narrow plank to restack them in the hold. Loading lasted almost three hours and was repeated twice on the journey. Since we only traveled by day the grand total amounted to an entire day spent doing nothing except fueling.

Was it really spent doing nothing? Or is this just a Western concept of nothingness? These lengthy loadings gave the passengers their only chance to wash cooking pots, catch up on laundry, clean teeth, and take a bath — all this, of course, in the receptive Mekong, which rejects no one on her long passage to the sea. Bathing perforce is a public enterprise so Laotian women have devised a neat system for bathing privately. They simply hoist their skirt, the national, fold-over tubular sin, to their armpits, wriggle out of their blouses, and bathe in their own private little cabanas. After the bath a clean tube is slipped over the head as the wet one is dropped feetward, dry upper garments are negotiated and the wet skirt sloshed about a bit, dried in the sun and ready for the next bath. I found the method a bit complicated over trousers.

In addition to these purely practical matters, the lengthy fuelings afforded villagers and passengers a chance to socialize and exchange news. Indeed, the *Pavie*'s passage seemed to be the big event of the week for those on shore who, gossiping and joking, clustered nearby throughout the loading. The long fueling also provided ample time for lengthy bargaining for provisions. Haggling for a half-dozen small fish or a couple of eggs was prolonged until the departure whistle sounded and the landing plank was withdrawn. Last-minute bargains were best of all. As strings of tiny salt fish, leaf-wrapped packets of prepared foods, and bamboo tubes of rice steamed with coconut came winging aboard, skill and speed were needed to make the transfer of purchase and pay between the already moving boat and a steep and muddy riverbank. Departures were always hilarious as the convulsed spectators noisily encouraged buyer and seller as each struggled to keep purchase or pay out of the Mekong. On one occasion we were under way before an audacious merchant who had come aboard the better to sell, discovered she'd missed the "all ashore that's going ashore." But no matter. This being Laos the captain obligingly sidled back to the riverbank where crew and passengers joined in steadying lady and goods on terra firma. We departed laughing.

I particularly prized these long stops. Although I had no cooking pots to wash, I enjoyed a chance to bathe (in the river, Laotian way), buy some fruit, and chat with the locals in mi-French, mi-Laotian. It also gave me time to explore the villages, always welcoming to a stranger. I poked about bamboo and thatch houses, raised on piles and nestled among banana palms and flowers and furnished with what the jungle offered — mats, baskets, and rattan stools. Cooking was done at an open hearth in an adjoining shed. Under the houses, in the cool shade among the supporting posts, were the rest of the material things necessary to Laotian life: wooden plows and handsome ox carts, crossbows, baskets for every purpose, fish traps, gourds, a foot-operated rice husker, and always a hand loom upon which even the tiniest girls wove exquisite fabrics. Oxen and water buffalo dozed there too, little black pigs and brilliant jungle fowl roamed beyond, and an occasional peacock paraded by in the sun. Surrounding all were the green or gold rice paddies and the vegetable, cotton, and tobacco patches. In my wanderings I was usually invited into someone's house for tea, *choum* (a strong rice liquor), snacks, or even for dinner. If nothing else, Laotians are party minded. Before the novelty of a stranger's presence, I have seen whole villages stop work, crowd the receiving cottage to bursting, and with the almost immediate appearance of food, drink, and musical instruments a party would be on. When the cause of the impromptu party slipped out to catch the departing boat there seemed no point in breaking up such a pleasant affair and the hilarious strains would accompany us around the next bend in the stream.

Not all the *Pavie*'s stops were as leisurely. For disembarking passengers there was only a momentary nuzzling of the bank, the passenger scrambling off and his belongings thrown after him by obliging fellow passengers. How the departees managed to get boxes, baskets, babies, and bicycles up the crumbling banks was a mystery. Despite the brevity of the stop there was nonetheless the usual exchange of news. At one halt we learned that a seventeen-year-old deckhand had died on an upstream-toiling barge. Chatting with friends one minute, he had fallen dead the next, said our riverbank informants. The officiating, yellow-robed Buddhist monks, like riverine sunflowers, were even then aboard. Though the lad had shipped on at Savannakhet only a few kilometers downstream, his body could not be returned for even on the *Pavie*, the fastest means, it would take a day and a half — too long in this tropical climate. I wondered when his family would learn of the loss, but none could say.

As for embarking passengers, unless we were already stopped, we did not stop at all. Would-be passengers came swirling out in pirogues to meet the steamer in midstream. Even though she obligingly slowed her engines it took skill to clamber aboard the towering craft from the wildly bobbing, unstable dugouts without getting soaked. Midstream boardings typically met with much laughter and shouted advice from those securely on board. One such boarding provided a glimpse of the autochthonous, Austro-Asiatic speakers who inhabit the Bolovens Plateau, the uplands of Lower Laos.[7] Hailing the *Pavie* from a deserted riverbank, dense with wild banana palms and liana-draped trees, they were three, disheveled and sun-blackened, who brought down to the Mekong fevers that kept them huddled on deck among their luggage — baskets, mats, smoke-blackened pots, and a bamboo

tube of strong tobacco. A day later they disembarked on another deserted beach. Backing into the stream we left them heading into the jungle, a knot of ragged humans and frayed gear dwarfed against the immensity of sand, sky, and water.

Our longest stops were overnight in the “big” towns. The first was Paksane, a French colonial town with a cluster of a half-dozen small shops along a rutted street, the remains of Colonial Route 13, the old Vientiane-Saigon highway.[8] Each, whether run by Chinese, Vietnamese, or Lao, offered about the same goods: sarongs from Thailand, flashlights, candles, hair pomade, thread, colored enamel basins, combs, cans of sweetened condensed milk, Nescafé, Ovomaltine, sardines, and goose liver paté. It seems that wherever there is a store in Laos, or a pretense of one, these last four items are always available though little sought by the locals. Emptied, however, Ovomaltine cans are now a characteristic item of Lao material culture, widely used for the trappings of betel-chewers. Empty Beaujolais and Perrier bottles also are much in evidence as flower-garden edgings.

In Paksane, accompanied by two friendly soldiers, I dined under the stars at a rickety table on a rickety stool in front of one of the shops. Our dinner music was tinkling, classical Thai issuing from the town’s only radio, so it was said, battery-operated and owned by the Chinese merchant in the next stall. Our meal was a thin noodle soup, known to Westerners as *soupe chinoise*, to locals as *pho* (a Vietnamese word), a dietary staple the length and breadth of Indochina. It is eaten with chopsticks and a ceramic soup spoon. Dinner concluded with stale packaged cookies and strong coffee in an unwashed glass.

In Paksane, one retired early, each little store boarded up in turn by its yawning proprietor and the last lamp winking out by nine. Aboard the *Pavie* the passengers also bedded down early — there was no social director, no bar, movies, or dancing under the stars. The crew, however, hilariously and noisily occupied the “gambling salon,” a space midships, next to the boilers, until the stars paled before the advancing dawn.


Fig. 10

Benign appearances notwithstanding, Paksane was in fact as wicked as the Barbary Coast. It was a center of opium trade. To Paksane and her waiting boats, the Meo on their little ponies clip-clopped down out of the cool plateaux where the poppies thrive (fig. 10, right).[9] Garbed in their distinctive costume and weighted with massive silver ornaments — portable opium profits — they shopped in Paksane for bright blankets, tinned milk, and cigarette lighters. National boundaries decree them to be Laotian but they are racially, culturally and linguistically distinct from the riverine Lao. Inhabiting every mountain top south to the eighteenth parallel, they are the most recent arrivals of various ethnic groups who have been filtering south from China for centuries.


Fig. 11

We tied up early at our next overnight, Thakhek, where the *Pavie*’s captain, Thao So, in his appointed role as guardian, host, and encyclopedia invited me to *pai lin ban*, stroll through the town (fig. 11, left).[10] On his arm, I found Thakhek, like Paksane, to be typical of the half-dozen or so French colonial administrative and commercial centers spaced along the left bank of the Mekong, all now a bit unkempt from the war years. Thakhek had a town square, a barn-like, thatch roofed market, and rows of one- and two-storeyed sheds partitioned into the shops and living quarters of tailors, basket and clay pot sellers, and purveyors of food and general merchandise (fig.12, below). They were mostly run by Vietnamese and Chinese but here, as a cosmopolitan note, there were also a few “Karachi” stores managed by Pakistanis. The customhouse and French import-export firms were a bit more grand. Electricity was a thing of the past and sewage slopped along in open ditches. Water was drawn from a community well in waterproofed baskets or carried from the Mekong in twin, five-gallon cans swinging at the ends of shoulder poles. There was a pagoda, a Catholic church and, beyond, bordering a grid of dusty streets, were abandoned French villas, festooned with bougainvillea, the gardens untended, and the roofs falling in. Farther out were Lao dwellings and then the jungle.


Fig. 12

Our afternoon stroll was to be only the prelude to a momentous evening that included participating in a reception, joining a wedding party, and attending the theater. I was glad I had turned in early at Paksane. It all started when coming by the customhouse we found a reception in full swing for a Thai custom officer from Nakhon Phanom across the river. Since Captain Thao So has been plying the Mekong for thirty-odd years and knows everyone, we were urged to come in. We did so but not before my escort, after announcing his intentions, trotted off a couple of steps and with modestly turned back relieved himself. To judge by the ravaged table and the forest of emptied bottles (cognac, whiskey, liquers, and beer) the reception had been long under way. When the captain drifted away for a bit I found myself seated beside the Thai official and his wife, both under the weather. Communication was limited and when my profession as “anthropologue” morphed into “astrologue” they begged me to cross the river with them that very night. The Thai government, they assured me, would certainly want to host such a distinguished personage. I demurred and at length, amidst protestations of undying Thai-Lao-American amity, the captain and I emerged into the cool and star-filled night. And directly into another party.

This time it was a formal, prenuptial dinner we had stumbled upon. Warmly encouraged to participate, we were seated at the head table with the groom, the bride’s mother, and four of her elderly cronies. The ladies were all of a piece, gray hair shaggily crew-cut for comfort, scarlet, betel-stained teeth and lips, and garrulous and uninhibited. I was their first acquaintance from America, a harbinger from the country they’d heard was bringing dollars to Laos. In the form of clinking bagfuls of goldpieces they eagerly awaited their arrival on the next upstream boat.

Rather than seated “at the head table” it would be more correct to write “on the head table.” Lao life is never lived more than a

few inches from the floor and the wedding dinner was no exception. Shoeless and cross-legged we weighted down the edge of a bamboo mat upon which the repast was served — basins of soup, bowls of *lap* (the national dish of chopped raw meat and vegetables), roasted fish, pickled greens, chopped this and diced that, and for each guest a small, lidded basket of glutinous rice. The latter is wadded into a ball and dipped in fermented fish sauce and chilies. The dishes were clustered in repeated pleiades (the more guests, the more clusters), a community service to and fro from which each division of guests plied fork, spoon, and fingers without the intermediary of individual service plates. After the repast we were pressed to attend the wedding itself, scheduled for eleven the next day. This we declined, for even the insouciant captain felt that it would make a rather late start on the trip southward. So we said our goodbyes and headed for the theater, the only planned portion of the evening's crowded agenda.

And what theater! Advertised to begin at 8:30 by a megaphoned barker with drum and xylophone wheeling through town in a *cyclopousse* (tricycle rickshaw), the play was well under way when we arrived at 8:00. It took place in a large bamboo-and-thatch shed crowded with benches and six wooden kitchen chairs, the front row orchestra seats to which we were ushered. Occupying the elevated stage was the unchanging scenery of a cloth-draped bench, a box (for a table), and two tabourets holding flowers in white-and-gold beer cans. Rosebud calico screened the wings and kerosene lanterns provided illumination. They were unconcernedly pumped up at intervals by a small boy, often at the play's most dramatic moments.

More opera than play, the dozen or so actors half sang, half declaimed their parts. They had the disconcerting practice of filling multiple roles with no accompanying costume change and occasionally to the strains of a reedy *khene* (bamboo panpipes) played backstage, they stopped everything to dance the *lam vong*. It is the national pastime in which the sexes, scrupulously apart, circulate in a hesitation one-step accompanied by stylized, storytelling gestures.

The plot, as whispered to me by the captain, concerned the complexities of plural marriage, a fitting subject for riverine Lao who are polygynous. A king, played by a stripling with floured face and ruby lips, wants a second wife but is thwarted by his first wife by a trumped- up charge of thievery against his chosen. In the forest where the condemned thief is to be executed, the dagger thrice flies out of the executioner's hand. At this divine sign, he frees her but, since the king has demanded her heart as proof of her death, the executioner substitutes the heart of a dog, hilariously mimed by a barking, crouching, sarong-swathed actor. Meanwhile the queen-nominee wanders the hostile forest — several passages of the stage — and at length sinks to her knees and weeping and screaming bears the king's son (a rag doll tossed on stage). Abandoned, but with an identifying ring, the princeling is rescued by a hermit, delivered to the king, the truth is out, the queen-nominee is in, and the jealous queen is executed instead.

Both audience and cast had a wonderful time throughout, the latter enjoying the dancing and laughing unabashedly at themselves and at each other when lines were flubbed (often), the former shouting approval, hooting at the queen's machinations, audibly sympathizing with the victimized, and loudly explaining to the king how he had things all wrong. They laughed, talked, ate and let their children have a good time too, frolicking under and around the stage. Although the drama's denouement came around 11:30, the fun gave no sign of drawing to a close so we slipped away to the waiting *Pavie*, stilled on the star-sprinkled waters of the Mekong.

Enjoyable and instructive as these on-shore excursions were, they were not essential for an appreciation of this seductive lotus land. For the *Pavie* carried Laos with her in capsule form, through captain, crew and passengers. On the first day out the captain invited me to dine with him and insisted that I be his star boarder all the way. Pay? "*Mais non*, impossible and unheard of," a firm position from which he would not budge. The dining salon was the forward deck where the captain, first mate, their assistant (*convoyeur*) and I sat on a yellow bamboo mat around charcoal broiled fish and chicken, soups and stews, enamel wash basins of boiled rice, baskets of glutinous rice, fish sauce laced with sizzling peppers, tiny golden bananas, tea, coffee, beer, and rice wine. Those bountiful repasts were prepared in an open galley on the rear of the lower deck. Equipment consisted of a two-burner, wood-burning stove, a clay charcoal brazier the size of a derby hat, a chopping block and a covey of assorted pans and baskets. No need for a refrigerator because the perishables — a small black pig and a half-dozen chickens and ducks — were kept alive until needed or, if there were a fish course, pulled from the river when the rice showed signs of being ready. Any inconvenience caused by not having piped running water was more than compensated by its limitless, unmetered, and constant presence. The garbage disposal unit was the livestock or the river. The galley also served as a self-service kitchen for the passengers who, at all hours, squatted about chopping this or that, steaming rice or endlessly preparing tiny catfish. One crone, bypassing the galley, scaled and split several dozen, which she dried in a pretty pattern on deck and sold to less enterprising passengers.


Fig. 13

The captain's cook and maitre d'hotel, was a small, whiskery old man with betel-stained lips and intricate blue tattoo patterns, like longish Bermuda shorts, covering pretty much everything from waist to below the knees where they terminated in a coquettish little scallop pattern. Unless at his bath, the tattoo was partly masked by a worn pair of conventional shorts. Several of the male passengers were similarly tattooed, and if they weren't, at least displayed a little fat-bellied Buddha image or long lines of charms in cursive Laotian script festooning neck and shoulders or marching down arms and legs (fig. 13, left). Even the most restrained had at least some small symbolic design somewhere and a few women also bore a modest little tattoo or so. Not so long ago, I was told, Laotian maidens spurned a tattooless suitor and since faint hearts won no fair lady they suffered two torturous days, tied down and sedated with opium. I noticed one *Pavie* passenger who apparently did lose heart and ended with only one side tattooed. Among riverine Laotians this custom is on the wane and it is rare to find a tattooed man under the age of thirty-five or forty. Its popularity continues among some of the hill tribes, where I have seen boys of twelve or thirteen wearing these tattooed britches.

Hospitality on the *Pavie* was not confined to her captain.[11] If I tried to buy fruit someone always insisted on paying for it. If I displayed curiosity about a particular comestible I would be handed a generous sample or one of my new-found friends would insist on buying it for me. Two young soldiers were particularly noteworthy in this respect. They tried to divide all their provisions with me — dried fish, fruit, prepared foods wrapped in banana leaves — and whenever there was a chance, buying me some local delicacy they thought I might like. I had sniggered when I saw one of them board bearing two feet of amber-colored, smoke-dried fish strapped to his duffle but a few hours later found myself happily gnawing on this same ridiculous fish. These boys even rose before dawn to shop in town for French bread for my breakfast — "but, madame, Europeans always eat bread for breakfast" — and kept it warm on the boiler until I appeared. My only reciprocation for all this, since I was traveling light and my money was rejected, was sharing a can of Nescafé and a box of cookies, handing out cigarettes, and dispensing a few pills.

With the exception of the captain and his assistant, the *convoyeur*, none of the crew spoke French but we communicated through smiles, cigarettes, and my few words of Laotian. They were all Laotians and all-Laotian with the expected traits of friendliness, humor, and the enviable capacity of seeing the sunny side of life, albeit one pretty miserable by American standards. They slept in the open like the second-class passengers, ate chiefly an unvaried diet of rice, fish, and chili peppers, drank straight from the Mekong and dressed mostly in ragged shorts or a sarong. They worked a twelve-hour day, seven days a week and earned the equivalent of $18.50 to $35 dollars a month. The stokers worked almost naked, wrestling huge logs into the glowing furnaces by hand and foot and sometimes getting badly burned in the course of it. From time to time they emerged from the boiler room, glistening with sweat, for the sweet pleasure of a cigarette and a long draught from the river. In the war years the crew also faced danger and sometimes suffered death. At the narrows, the Viet Minh ambushed the *Pavie*, then freighting supplies and troops for the French, raking it with murderous fire from the jungle-covered shore. One of the *Pavie*'s captains was killed as were many of the crew and passengers. The *Pavie* still wore her protective steel plate around the pilot stall and gun emplacements still marked the afterdeck. Occasional uncaulked bullet holes were also souvenirs of these difficult years.

Yet with all this the crew had fun. They laughed and joked, called out to the *phou sao* (young girls) on the riverbanks, and from time to time lounged in the breeze on the bow of the lower deck where someone played a *khene* or they sang *lam vong* songs. Squatting on a mat, by starlight and candlelight they gambled joyously far into the night. Their belief in the *phi*, assorted maleficent spirits, was evidenced in their well-tended altar at the prow, a stunted plant in a tin can assiduously watered each day. To this centerpiece they often added a clump of fresh flowers, little balls of glutinous rice, and one day a multicolored, celluloid dragon appeared. At night a small candle flickered there and incense sticks glowed like clustering fireflies.

On the grey decks of the *Pavie* one seemed to be adrift in time and space in an endless landscape of brown waters, emerald vegetation and, in the distance, grey and purple mountains etched against a blue and cloud-tossed sky. One idled along contentedly lost in observing the Mekong and the life it supported. The water, awash with rich silts gathered in its long passage, looked like slightly curdled café au lait, speckled with flecks of foam, eddying clumps of undissolved mud, and at times bearing a vermilion stain of expectorated betel juice like a miniature air-sea rescue marker. Sand bars were dotted with resting gulls or with seasonal fishing camps composed of lean-tos, black nets, and beached pirogues. Ripples, eddies, and miniature whirlpools warned of sweeping currents and submerged dangers only half suspected beneath the sun-drenched, placid-seeming expanse. Occasionally there were gently boiling rapids through which we cautiously sought the channel. In other places we picked our way through dangerous shallows, groped with idling engines while a deckhand, with a measuring stick, chanted out the depths in the best Mark Twain tradition. Sometimes we paced a lonely coconut or a bit of yellow bamboo drifting by in a tranquil journey to the sea. Tropical butterflies fluttered across our decks or on some secret quest beat purposefully downstream. Occasionally we crossed paths with motor pirogues toiling upstream with a file of high-pooped barges, each with a giant rudder guided from a straw-canopied aerie overhead. Fragile-looking pirogues with a lone fisherman or filled to the gunwales with passengers traversing to or from Thailand also crossed our bow from time to time. Once in awhile one saw miniature rafts, like children's toys, bobbing gaily along under tiny lateen sail and bearing small propitiatory gifts — an egg, some rice, flowers, a chili pepper or two — for the ever-lurking *phi*.

At times we passed deserted shores abandoned to the lush growth of banana and coco palms, impenetrable bamboo, and towering trees. At other times the steep banks were already greening with new corn, tobacco and cotton, sometimes cultivated on laboriously terraced and fenced patches. As the water level rose in its seasonal fluctuation they would be submerged and, resilted with rich soils, be ready to resume the eternal cycle as the waters receded once more. Huge, roughly conical, woven bamboo fish traps lay strewn along these banks like giant turtle eggs. Water buffalo cautiously picked their way down the banks to drink. People were few — a lone figure dibbling in a garden patch, a woman laundering, a child drawing water, for at this season the villages are deserted for the rice harvesting in the paddies lying concealed beyond. Pagodas with multiple curlicue roofs, flanked with spired, bell-shaped stupas appeared regularly and once I glimpsed a cross.

Several times we passed the embouchures of clear blue, mountain streams tumbling out of the mysterious mountains beyond. They bore alluring names: Nam Ngum, Nam Man, Nam Nhiep, Nam Sane, Nam Hin Boun and Se Bang Fay and promised romantic adventures in the valleys beyond. They sorely tested the *Pavie*'s fidelity to the broad Mekong. Purple mountains, flung as a bristling protective ridge of crags and vegetation between the rich Laotian valley and aggressive, land-hungry Vietnam, framed our horizon. From the forested slopes, hostile and malaria-ridden, came occasional spicy scents breathing of sandalwood and teak sought there, perhaps since time began. From these slopes came also tributes of tiger skins, rhinoceros horn, elephant tusks, and precious metals that once upon a time filtered down to the greedy sovereigns of now-forgotten states.

As all idylls must, mine with the *Pavie* drew to a close as we nosed in among the loading barges at Savannakhet. It is a prosaic town where merchandise trucked there from Saigon is transferred to barges for the slow, nine-day struggle upstream to Vientiane. Here some of it is transferred again to motor pirogues, like the *Star of Laos II* I had voyaged on earlier, and carried to

Luang Prabang and points farther north. Loath to part with the *Pavie*, I slept aboard the last night, watching the sun drift behind the mountains of Thailand across the way, listening to the creaking barges, and hearing for the last time the starry night Mekong lapping at the *Pavie*'s grey sides.

Some weeks later, I again fell in with the Mekong for a day, creeping slowly south through submerged mangroves and shallows aboard the forlorn *Colombert* to Khinak, the last stop before the thundering Khone Falls. They mark the Cambodian border and create an almost impassable barrier to further travel on the Mekong until, resumed below them, it continues uninterrupted to the South China Sea.

I know that sometime soon the river and I will meet again, that I'll choose another stretch, fall in with another boat, and surrender myself to its ageless flow. But I doubt that I shall ever encounter a boat like the *Pavie* or the memorable voyage she gave me.

After receiving a doctorate in anthropology from Columbia University in New York City, Mary Slusser spent many years living and working abroad. She has spent many years exploring the region of the Himalayas, including seven years in Nepal. In 1982 her *Nepal Mandala: A Cultural Study of the Kathmandu Valley*, appeared, and has since stood as the most complete single work on the cultural history of the Nepal valley. Her most recent book, *The Antiquity of Nepalese Woodcarving* (2010), drastically revised our perception of the marvelous wooden sculpture of the Kathmandu Valley.

Mary Slusser's work on the history of the art and culture of Nepal is marked by a series of discoveries and critical reassessments that have advanced our comprehension of this extraordinarily rich culture and art in a revolutionary way; they include groundbreaking work on Nepalese metalcraft, stone sculpture, architecture and painting. Now a research associate at the Sackler Gallery of the Smithsonian Institution, she continues her studies into the art and culture of the Himalayas.

FOOTNOTES

1. Recent computations make the distance 3050 miles (4880 km) (Edward Gargan, *The River´s Tale: A Year on the Mekong* (New York, Knopf, 2002), p. 11 and note). Milton Osborne, *The Mekong, Turbulent Past, Uncertain Future* (New York: Grove Press, 2000) 18-19, provides a slightly different figure.

2. See especially Edward Gargan *op. cit.*, 117-34, 145-208 but also Michael Hanowsky, "In Cambodia: Traveling the water ways of Indochina," *Counterpoint* 25:3 (November 2003), pp. 14-16 and Milton Osborne, *op. cit.*, pp. 153-4 and *passim*.

3. Gargan, *op. cit.*, pp. 9, 128.

4. It also complements a report of travel on the Mekong in the previous decade (Jean Deuve, "La remontée du Mékong de Vientiane à Luang Prabang en 1947," *Moussons* 2 (2000), pp. 99-111.

5. For an appreciation of mid-1950s, pre-tourist Vientiane, with an American permanent presence of about 10 to 20 persons, see Oden Meeker, *The Little World of Laos* (New York: Scribners, 1959).

6. In 1955 I could little imagine that this would be only the First Indochina War and that a more disastrous Second Indochina (Vietnam) War was so soon to follow.

7. They were then referred to by the all-embracing term "Kha," a pejorative not employed by any of the diverse people to whom it was applied.

8. On modern maps now spelled Pakxan.

9. As the Hmong were commonly called at this time.

10. Replaced with Khammouan, the old name Thakhek/Tha Khaek, has disappeared from modern maps.

11. But his concern for my welfare, I see from my field notes, was all-embracing. As custodian of the key to the W.C. he worried, "Madame two days on *bateau, cabinet* one time. Tch! Tch!"