

Max's Tribute to Filipinos in Laos

By Pete Fuentecilla

Maximo Soliven, publisher of the daily newspaper Philippine Star, died November 24, 2006 in Japan from a heart attack. He was 77 years old. He was by most accounts one of the country's great journalists. He was in Laos in 1959 and 1960.

In 2002, on the occasion of the visit of the Lao Prime Minister to the Philippines, he wrote this column:

OPINION

Fond memories of heroes who labored gallantly in places they never knew

BY THE WAY by Max V. Sollven

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When it was announced that Mr. Boun-Nhang Vorachith, Prime Minister of the Lao People's Democratic Republic, had arrived for a three-day visit, some friends of mine exclaimed, "Where's Laos?" And one even quipped: "Laus na ba?" (In Tagalog this means: "Is it passé?")

On the contrary, the arrival of the Lao Prime Minister ought to remind us of what we Filipinos used to be to some of our Asian neighbors, and what we - inspired by their generosity and heroism - can be again. If we only pull ourselves out of the blue funk in which we have immersed ourselves by our open-ended political quarrels and intrigues, the deterioration of our self-confidence and self-respect, the disintegration of our morals, and the decay of the "old values" which sustained and energized our forefathers. That's admittedly a tall order - but nothing, by the grace of God, is impossible under the sun.

Laos today is run by an unabashedly Communist regime which took full control in 1975, but "Communism", as the saying goes, ain't what it used to be. The Lao People's Republic joined the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN) in July 1997, and has cheerfully since then been a member of our club.

With a small but industrious population to five million, Laos - a completely landlocked country (surrounded by China in the north, Vietnam in the northeast, Thailand in the west, and Cambodia in the south) - remains an eden as far as forest cover is concerned, including verdant stretches of teak.

It is also a minefield, thanks to the unexploded remnants of American cluster bombs dropped by US and Royal Lao aircraft during the "war" against the Communist *Pathet Lao*. The *Pathet Lao*, with the help of the formidable Vietnamese, triumphed in the end.

The Lao kingdom, under its unifier, Fa Ngum, was known from the year 1353 as Lane Xang, "*The Land of a Million Elephants and the White Parasol*."

When this correspondent was covering Laos in 1959 and the 1960s, I counted only between 60 to 70 elephants from San Neua in the north (right smack against the Chinese border) to Saravan and Savannakhet in the south.

Where the rest of the other million elephants went, I can't tell. I know that in one rickety shop in Luang Prabang, I was once offered a standing giant "ash tray" made up of an elephant's leg. When he mentioned an outrageous price, I asked the old Chinese shopkeeper why it was so "expensive". To which he replied in rather good French that, "naturally, there are only four legs to each elephant." Appalled at the thought that I might be responsible for encouraging a poaching racket that specialized in cutting off elephants' legs (though the unfortunate pachyderms are prized more for the ivory of their tusks), I turned his offer down - and departed.

As for the white parasol, somebody must have filched it long ago.

Alas, Laos is best known for something less edifying. It is part of the Golden Triangle of Thailand, Myanmar (Burma) and Laos, where the poppy which produces opium and heroin is grown. As long as there are customers, I'm afraid, poppies will be grown - even in Afghanistan.

Remember the good old days in the capital, Vientiane (*Vieng Chan* means "Citadel of the Moon"). In 1959, the plushiest night spot in that rather backward "city" (which at the time didn't have much plumbing, or a decent sewerage system, like we do) was the "*Vieng Raty*."

The V.R.'s main attraction was an excellent Filipino band and we used to spend many hours there drinking *Tiger* beer or Mekong "water" (a kind of rotgut that pleasantly corroded your insides), since champagne was exorbitant in cost and could be afforded only by the smugglers and black marketeers.

The band's expertise was to play those upbeat tunes to which people could dance the *lam bong* (identical to the *ram wong* of the Thais). They cleverly even set *Manang Biday*, the Ilocano folksong, to the *lam bong* beat.

After a few bottles one night, a Laotian buddy of mine asked: "Do you know what our favorite proverb is?" He immediately went on to answer his own question: "Here's how it goes. If you should ever be tempted to work, lie down and go to sleep. By the time you wake up again, the temptation will have disappeared."

They even have a similar expression to our *bahala na*. It is "*bo penyang*", which, like the *mal pen rai* of the Thais, means "never mind". If you have problems, never mind. If you are in danger, never mind.

There is more than laziness to the Lao attitude, as in ours. It is resignation to a Divine Providence (in their sense, the Lord Buddha) beyond the reach and comprehension of man. I don't know how they reconcile this with Marxism or Maoism, or even Ho Chi Minhism, but the gentle religion of the Buddha teaches the transitoriness of all things.

We should rekindle our old, once familiar ties with Laos. The younger ones have forgotten us, but their elders surely remember. There was a time when no Filipino could ever get lost in Vientiane. All he had to do was flag down a *samlor* pedicab driver, and pronounce the magic words: "*Long mo Philippines!*" The pedicab "coolie" (do they still exist?) would immediately and cheerfully pedal the *Pinoy* on his way. For the words meant, "Philippine hospital" - a word which almost every Laotian, in those days gone by, used to know.

This is because in January 1957, 90 Filipino doctors, nurses, agricultural advisers, social workers, under the aegis of "Operation Brotherhood" - yes, O.B., - had

(see back)

arrived in Laos. Soon, there were 10 hospitals all over the difficult terrain, right up to Phong Saly at the Chinese frontier. O.B. - known in French as *Operation Fraternité* - even set up "floating clinics" such that medical centers, staffed by a doctor, dentist, nurse and social worker, could cruise up and down the Mekong River and its tributaries, visiting farflung villages and cantons.

The O.B. doctors, nurses, and other volunteers, were as ignorant as most people at home about this strange country. But, challenged by the late Oscar Arellano and the Jaycees (to their eternal credit), they brought into that tiny landlocked "kingdom" their medical skills and their eagerness. They found a land where 60 percent of the children died at birth or in infancy, where malnutrition was endemic, where malaria, dysentery and trachoma were each a chronic scourge.

Eight makeshift hospitals sprang up in different areas. The largest, at Paksong, could treat 50 persons at a time. O.B. physicians, nurses and dentists soon found their hands full in such scattered medical command posts as Xieng Ngeum, Thakhek, Attopeou, San Neua, Nambac, Ban Banne and Vientiane itself.

What was significant about our O.B. volunteers was that they treated everybody, as they had in Vietnam where they launched their first projects in 1954 among refugee encampments, whatever their ideology. When Viet Cong were wounded, they were received by O.B. doctors and nurses for treatment. When *Pathet Lao* or their family members needed help, they were taken in without reluctance.

That was the wonderful thing about that movement which might mystify cynics on some day. I can only repeat what I wrote then, on August 27, 1959, on the old *Manila Times*:

"One does not root out illness by surgery or prescribing pills. Poverty and ignorance are the handmaids of disease. The (O.B. teams realized that) villages had to be transformed, their standards of living raised." This was what they set out to do.

The late Dr. Thomas A. Dooley, the famed jungle doctor and author (*Deliver us from Evil, The Edge of Tomorrow*) who for years directed an American medical unit in Muong Sing, more eloquently summed up the O.B. effort in a 1957 book in this manner:

"In Vietnam and now in Laos, young Filipino doctors and

nurses, joined by other Asians, have held high the candle of medical care. This has penetrated the darkest recesses of misery . . . The staff of O.B. does not blabber. They do not bleat. They do not try to sell this or that. They simply take care of people who are sick. Simply help people who are sick because they are sick."

"In a way," he wrote admiringly, "they reaffirm the Biblical words, 'And God hath made of one blood, all men, to dwell on the face of the earth.'"

Even the great Dr. Albert Schweitzer, the world-renowned medical missionary in Africa, once paid this tribute: *"Many men profess their belief in the oneness of all men. This they do in easy creed. The Filipino program seems to be professing it in difficult deed."*

I remember many of them well - earnest young men and women, ages between 25 and 29. They are all "retired" now, some of them living in the United States. I remember, too, that when O.B. "packed up" and its teams left in 1973, the villagers wept.

Architect Oscar Arellano and most of the Jaycees who founded the O.B. movement in 1954 died years ago. But they will never die as long as memory exists. I can never forget Oscar's challenge when he was raising money for that "impossible" undertaking among skeptics and charitable souls alike. He would boom: *"Where else can you save a human life for the price of one pack of cigarettes?"*

He would also exclaim: *"Nothing can withstand the power of love!"*

That is the power that should inspire us still.

Once upon a time, a band of eager, terrific Filipinos did tremendous things - laboring in two countries they had never known, in places whose names they could barely pronounce. All that they knew was that it was their duty to help their fellow-men. This was reward enough for them.

Can the Filipino do it again? Of course, we can.

Almost half of it is devoted to the work of Filipinos in Laos, notably Operation Brotherhood. For a short description of his five-decade journalistic career, visit <http://en.wikipedia.org> and type in "maximo soliven" in the search box.