

SOMBATH SOMPHONE¹

SOMBATH Somphone was born on February 17, 1952 in Done Khio, a village along the Mekong River in southern Laos. His parents named him Bath, which in English means *to faint* or *to pass out*. Though Buddhism had a presence in Done Khio, the indigenous Lao were still basically animists, and, as their firstborn was fragile in infancy—“a weak and sickly baby”—his parents believed that the spirits would spare him if he were given an inauspicious name. “Som” would be added to his name much later, when he was already a thriving adolescent, to form the more respectable Sombath, which means *wealth* or *heritage*.

Done Khio and its neighboring villages were, at the time of Sombath’s birth, undeveloped economically and politically. The land was largely communal. Indigenous Lao could claim land where they wanted. “Just as long as you had the labor to open up new land, you could have as much land as you could,” says Sombath. If one wanted to till an already opened plot of land, he only had to seek permission from the one who had cleared it previously.

Sombath was from a family named Thepsomphone (his father dropped the first syllable later). The Thepsomphones were, like most of the villagers, subsistence rice farmers and gatherers, hunting for game in the wilds surrounding the village, and fishing on the Mekong and the small lakes that dotted the landscape. Sombath’s paternal grandfather, one of the village pioneers, had a relatively large property, where all his eight children and their families lived and worked.

The village was composed of large extended families who were governed by the patriarch, as was Sombath’s family. In Done Khio, people had no means of communication or transport; to get from one place to the next, they had to, Sombath says, “walk the path of animals.”

LIFE in Done Khio was simple and time moved very slowly. There was only the land, the river, and the spirits. Village boys had the responsibility of tending the buffaloes, and, for these young men, there was but one prospect for the future: to carry this life of subsistence on to the next generations.

When Say Somphone, Sombath’s father, was a young boy, Buddhist monks started to teach school to boys in the temple. It was a development that Sombath’s grandfather did not welcome. “Grandpa did not value education, as education was not available during his time.” Thepsomphone would not hear of his son wasting his time in school—for who would tend to the buffaloes?—and he strictly forbade Say to go. “Dad wanted to go to school with his friends. Those boys took care of buffaloes, so they were buffalo boys. They knew one another. His friends started to go to school and my father wanted to join them. Every time he went to school, he got beaten by grandpa.”

Say Somphone’s greatest disappointment was his lack of education, especially because some of those who had gone to school, less smarter than he was, made something of themselves and rose up in society. And so when Sombath was a tiny four-year-old, Say forced him to go to school at the temple, to the distress of Sombath’s mother. “I remember mom used to cry because I was forced to study at a young age. Even though I wanted to sleep, I was not allowed to sleep. I had to study. Not only mom; grandma was crying also.”

Sombath would later realize that his father did not just want to go to school just to be with friends, but might have been genuinely hungry for knowledge, and that he wanted to make up, through his son, for his missed opportunities. In Sombath’s assessment, his father was an intelligent man—“very bright and broad minded,” he says.

Sombath remembers the house his father built. It stood on stilts and was made of wood like all the other structures in Done Khio. But the roof was made of firebricks, a sign of relative wealth in a village of thatched roofs. This was because Say Somphone had a business. “After I was born, my dad realized that the amount of land that grandpa had opened up to divide up among his eight siblings would not be enough to sustain his family, so that’s when he became more of a merchant.”

Say saw opportunity in jute, as all the villagers used jute sacks for their produce. And so he invested some money and hired men to work his jute plantation while he attended to the business of making and selling jute sacks. “Our house was full of sacks of jutes. And it was quite dangerous because jute catches fire. And when

¹ This article was written on the occasion of Sombath's receiving the Magsaysay Award for Community Leadership in 2005.

I studied, I used kerosene lamps.” The young Sombath in fact once fell asleep while studying, and the kerosene lamp fell and almost started a fire.

An enterprising spirit would lead Say from one business to the next. He sold pigs, manned boats that ferried people and supplies up and down the Mekong, and co-owned a transport service. He was a farmer, a laborer, a merchant, and an entrepreneur.

He was also a very sociable fellow. He was friendly with opposing factions in society, such that feuding armies of bandits, the Red Tigers and Black Tigers, were alternately entertained in their home, as were soldiers of the Royal Lao Army. Later, he also assisted the pro-Communist Pathet Lao.

These connections did little for the Somphone family. Once, they almost got Say killed by a band of thieves called the Red Tigers. Relatives of Sombath’s mother came to his father for help when the Red Tigers stole forty heads of cattle from them. Being a known friend of these bandits, they thought Say could help them recover their loss. But when Say asked the Red Tigers to return the cows, the bandits turned on him instead. They tortured him and made him kill his buffalo and eat it raw. Thereafter, they tied him to a pole and threatened to shoot him by sunset if the family did not pay ransom. Say survived the ordeal—villagers pitched in for his ransom—but it traumatized both him and his wife, and there began Say’s desire to move his family away from the increasingly lawless village of Done Khio.

AROUND the time Sombath was eight years old, Say brought his family across the Mekong to Thailand where Sombath’s mother’s relatives lived. The conflict between the Royal Army and the Pathet Lao had escalated, and the Royal Army, suspecting that he was sympathetic to the Pathet Lao, had started to harass Say.

For a year they lived as refugees, and Sombath had to stop school. They lived in a house that belonged to a distant relative of Sombath’s mother. His father was constantly away the whole time they were in Thailand. “And we didn’t have rice. Rice was on the Laos side, so I had to cross the river to get it,” says Sombath. He had the difficult task of paddling a small canoe across the Mekong River to Done Khio every two weeks. It was a dangerous journey for such a small boy, as the Mekong was two kilometers across and the current unpredictable. But it had to be him. The Royal Army had set up tight security patrols on the banks of the Mekong. Adults were always suspected of taking food to the Pathet Lao. “I was a kid, so I was the only one who could cross the river. I remember, an adult relative would stand by the river to watch me, and I would paddle off. And there’s an island in the middle you had to get to, carry the rice across the island, and then cross the river to reach the other bank.”

After a year of this, Say brought the family back to Laos. The family had moved to Tha Khek, the capital city of the province some 60 kilometers from their village. Say had no choice but to go into trading since they did not own land in Tha Khek. Say stayed with his family briefly but was once again off on his ventures. “At that time he had started helping the Pathet Lao. That’s when we moved to Tha Khek. He could not stay in the village anymore. We started with nothing (in Tha Khek). Then again he went away, and I had to build a hut for the family to live in. I was about fourteen at that time, but my next younger brother helped in building the house.”

Despite the many ventures that took him away from his family, Say did not meet with much success. When he had money, he openly shared it with everybody he knew. An honest man, he was too trusting of other people. At times, his generosity would leave him penniless, as it did when his transport business co-owners cheated him out of his rightful share. It was Sombath’s mother who took on the task of providing for the needs of the family.

Sombath’s mother, an ethnic Lao, was born on the Thailand side of the Mekong. Sombath describes her as a “faithful woman,” who raised her kids almost single-handedly because her husband was hardly ever home. “She was like most females in the society who were almost like second-class citizens. I recognized that as I grew up and read more about gender. I don’t think she really enjoyed life as much except for raising us. Dad always went places. Mom basically stayed at home. Up to today, when I take my mom out somewhere, she is very reluctant to go because she’s been so homebound all her life.”

Her life had been far from easy. Apart from having the responsibility of financially supporting the family, there were the difficulties of living with in-laws when they were in Done Khio. (In Laos, the wife moves in with her husband’s family.) Social norms dictated that wives had to behave all the time in the presence of in-

laws. “They watched their every move. And if their kids misbehaved in front of their in-laws, they were not supposed to discipline the kids in front of them. They had to maintain a subtle discipline, but the in-laws could beat up the kids anytime, and they couldn’t say anything.”

Sombath’s mother had very little formal education. She could barely read or write. But in the difficult years when the Somphone children were growing up, she was the family’s source of strength and stability.

ON account of Say’s long and constant absences, Sombath—the firstborn, only six years old at the time—was given domestic responsibilities that were extraordinarily heavy for a boy his age. While his mother worked in the fields, the burden of raising the younger children fell on Sombath.

“I did not have a normal boyhood because of the family responsibility that rested on me so heavily. I did not have the chance to play like other boys. Because I was the eldest son, and next to me was another son, I had to take care of him and discipline him; and next to him was a girl. She was physically weak and passed away when she was three years old, so I had to take care of her. And then there’s the fourth one, also a girl. I had to take care of all of my siblings at that time. Mother was working out in the field. Father disappeared. So I didn’t have a normal boyhood. I saw other boys playing, having fun, but I usually didn’t have the opportunity.”

Sombath had to cook for the family. “And after they ate I had to clean up. So I played the role of a daughter and son, in a sense. I therefore missed out on boyhood, which is basically fishing, hunting, playing. I had very little of that. When I go out to hunt and fish, for example, I enjoy it but I don’t catch as much as the others do because I didn’t have enough experience. And dad was not there to show me how.”

But the task that Sombath found most difficult was fetching water from the Mekong. It was a long and arduous walk to and from the steep riverbanks with two full buckets of water balanced on a pole on his shoulders. There were no wells in Done Khio, and all households went to the river to get water. In Laos, it was a chore for daughters. Unluckily for Sombath, his sisters were even younger and smaller than he was at the time.

On top of all his chores, Sombath had to continue with his education. His first taste of school was at the temple near his home in Done Khio. There were no chairs for the students to use, so they sat down on the wooden floor. Still, they were luckier than the first generation of students in Done Khio, who had sat on the bare ground. And, while monks taught the earlier students, Sombath’s generation had lay teachers who were sent to Done Khio by the government.

By fourth grade, Sombath had to go to a public elementary school in Nonglom, a village more than an hour’s walk away from Done Khio. It was a long trek through the jungle, and often he was chased by buffaloes and monkeys, which the daily trip more tiring than it already was. He alternated wearing the only two pairs of short pants he owned, and for a time he was barefoot. It was a while before he was able to go to school in slippers. “Much later I got a bicycle—a small bicycle, because my father won the lottery. But I had to carry the bicycle because there were no roads. You had to carry the bicycle in some places because of the mud,” says Sombath.

But it was an exciting time of learning. He was enthusiastic about school, and made it a point to study his lessons at home. He woke up before daybreak to fix breakfast, and while the rice cooked, he studied by the light of the open-fire stove.

In Nonglom, his classmates were older and bigger than he was. Some of their teachers were lazy, and would often delegate the job of teaching to the smartest student. And that happened to be Sombath. One teacher went to the extent of having Sombath impose discipline on classmates who misbehaved—corporal punishments such as having them kneel on jackfruit skin, making them hold up two bricks for a length of time, or rubbing their faces with chalk from the blackboard eraser.

And so these boys, who had to bear punishment from Sombath in the classroom, would then beat him up at break time or after class. This pattern went on for years. But he never told his parents about it. “Somehow kids have their own secret life, unless your parents tried to make you open up. I didn’t feel I needed to talk to my parents at all. This was how kids grew up; this was my life.”

SOMBATH was a naturally fast learner, even outside of school on practical skills like basket weaving. Basket weaving was a common skill in Laos. It was the men who wove rice baskets, fish traps, and containers for seeds and grains. “Normally, basket weaving is a job for men, not for boys. But when I looked at them weaving, I picked it up quickly. Grandpa showed me and I quickly learned the pattern. But I didn’t have the finger strength to really tighten the basket. So Grandpa would tighten it for me. I would do the weaving then give it to him. So a lot of people were very impressed. They said, ‘How can a boy weave a basket?’”

Sombath’s regret is that he could have learned more practical skills from his father. But Say, apart from not having been around much to teach his son these skills, had a different priority where his oldest son was concerned: formal education.

When the Somphones were still living in Done Khio, Sombath attended school in Tha Khek for half a year. His father took him to live with one of his business partners. This fellow made Sombath live in truck garage. He had a son with whom Sombath went to school, and who embarrassed Sombath there, pointing out his pauper’s clothes for everyone to laugh at. This was the first time he discovered a life different from the one he knew. And though he loathed the taunts of his well-to-do classmates, he knew that if he wanted to make something of himself he had to do as well as he could.

Sombath did return to the Nonglom school after a semester and summer term in Tha Khek. He only returned to Tha Khek when he was in middle school. Say borrowed money to buy his son’s only pair of pants. And then he brought Sombath to live with an elderly lady named Bang, the caretaker of a house that belonged to one of Say’s friends. Bang was a kindly woman who had no children of her own. Sombath would stay with her the whole time he attended middle school.

Living with Bang afforded Sombath the first easygoing years of his life. She did not require chores of him, and Sombath used the free time to study. He was attending a school run by the French, where, Sombath says, the standard of instruction approximated that of the French education system. Most of his teachers were French nationals; there were only a few Laotians in the faculty. Admission standards were high. The entrance examination was very difficult and once enrolled, the student had to maintain certain standards of performance. Students could repeat a course only once; a second failure, and they were thrown out.

Sombath knew that education was his only key to making a good life for himself, and he was not about to blow it. Unlike his wealthier classmates who could afford to change schools if they failed, he knew that it was make or break for him. He studied diligently. As a result, he was on top of all his classes and was well liked by his teachers. He received incentives of books and stipends for his academic achievements. He says, “I remember all the years I was in school, I did not pay for books. These were given to me as prizes.”

SOMBATH’s family finally left Done Khio and moved to Tha Khek, but by then Sombath was about to move to Savannakhet for upper secondary levels. And so his reunion with his family was brief — just enough time to construct a hut for them to live in, and then he was off to the trading town of Savannakhet (capital of the province of the same name, now second largest city in Laos).

In Savannakhet, he lived with another of his father’s friends. In this house he was made to do the bulk of the household chores in exchange for his board and lodging, albeit he slept in the garage, with the bicycles. Sombath had grown much stronger then, and though doing everything from the laundry, to cleaning house, to cooking tired him, it was not as hard for him as it had been in Done Khio. He remains grateful to this family for having him in their home. He considers the favor, to this day, as a critical factor in his success.

Doing chores did not affect his performance in school. He was still at the top of the class. His classmates called him “the most serious person in the world.” “I don’t joke around. I guess it’s a complex—being from a poor family from a rural area who went to town.” He was also the youngest and the smallest person in his classes. Most of his classmates were two, three, even five years older than he was, since he did not only start school early, he did not have to repeat a year in school unlike most of his contemporaries.

About the time Sombath was staying in Savannakhet, the French government was having difficulty in maintaining Laos as a colony. The Americans, already involved in the Indochina war, were slowly easing them out of Laos.

One such American was Sylvester Morris, a teacher who lived beside the house where Sombath stayed in Savannakhet. Morris taught English at the school Sombath attended, and at the American School in the evenings. He would often ride by in his bicycle as Sombath rested outside after fetching water from the well.

Sombath recalls one particular evening vividly. “When he saw me, he asked me, ‘What are you doing here?’” When Sombath replied that he was resting because he was tired, Morris asked him whether he wanted to go to night classes at the American school. “I said I didn’t have money and he just laughed. And then he asked me, “‘Do you want to study?’” I said ‘Of course.’ So he said, ‘Okay, I will pay for your school fees. Would you go?’ I stood up and said, ‘Are you serious?’”

Sombath accepted the offer and began attending classes in English at the American School. But Morris’s influence on Sombath would not end there. When he learned that Sombath was doing well in both schools, Morris offered to help him get a scholarship in the U.S. Without much thought, Sombath agreed.

Knowing little of the United States at that time, the prospect of studying there did not excite him as much as the idea of going to Vientiane, where he was to take the qualifying exams. Sombath filed the requisite applications and took the tests without serious thought for he was simply thrilled to see the capital. And so when his passing the exams and acceptance to the exchange student program materialized, it seemed to him more a bane than a boon.

The French teachers discouraged him, for one thing. They said that the year in America would not be credited academically in Laos, so that when he came back, he would fall a year behind his class. Sombath did not want that. He started to give Morris the runaround, even went to the extent of hiding in Thak Khek in the summer.

Morris tracked him down and talked him into accepting the scholarship. Feeling trapped, Sombath agreed, but just as soon fled to Vientiane with a friend, risking their lives by boldly stealing a ride in a U.S. military plane in a local airbase. But Morris was relentless. Before long, he was in Vientiane and, finding Sombath walking in the street, collared him. Sombath had his excuses: he was stranded in Vientiane; he didn’t have the money for airfare back to Tha Khek; he didn’t have money to pay for the suit required for the travel to America. Morris fixed all that for him. He took him to a tailor and had a suit made, and he put him on a plane back to Tha Khek so that he could say goodbye to his family and friends.

IN 1969, at age sixteen, Sombath Somphone got on a plane and flew to America under the American Field Service (AFS) exchange student program. On the same flight, there were at least 200 of them in this batch of exchange students; seven Lao; the rest, Thai.

They entered the United States through New York, where they stayed in a university dormitory while their individual assignments were being processed. America was a shock to him. He had never before seen high-rise buildings, and the New York skyline filled him with awe. He had trouble in an elevator, the first one he had ever seen, by punching all the buttons, including the emergency fire alarm. “The elevator stopped, and then the shower started. I didn’t understand the word *pull*, so I got stuck in there. And after a while I started playing with every button and that’s when everything stopped. I think they knew who did it, but because I would be embarrassed, they didn’t say anything,” Sombath recalls.

From New York, Sombath boarded a bus to a small Wisconsin suburb called Glenbeulah, which was so small, it did not have its own high school. He attended the high school in nearby Elkhart Lake.

He stayed with a family that had two sons, one older and one younger than him. Sombath and his hosts’ children had a hard time adjusting to one another. They would yell at him for turning on the radio in the morning. It was quite a situation, as he was rooming in with them. After a few months, Sombath decided it was not working out, and he requested for a transfer.

He had a more pleasant time with his second foster family, the Bardons. The two sons were younger than he was, and were more welcoming. Foster parents Oscar and Phillis Bardon told Sombath to call them mom and dad, and made him feel part of the family. The Bardons would be his lifelong friends, a surrogate family. Even today, he visits the Bardons when he goes to America and continues to be in contact with the children, David, Dennis, and Lorry.

It surprised Sombath that the Bardon boys complained about having to take the trash out some nights—such a simple thing that did not even count as a chore to Sombath. The Bardons did not assign him any chores

either, and that somehow did not feel right to him, so he volunteered to do the lawn and clean the swimming pool. He looked forward to these chores, especially mowing, as he enjoyed using the lawnmower and loved the smell of freshly cut grass.

In Elkhart, sports was part of the curriculum, and though he was not inclined to sports, Sombath had to “play” something. Perhaps because of his slight build, he chose track and wrestling. He also learned to enjoy watching team sports, going to ball games with his foster family on many occasions.

But there were challenges. Sombath was lonely for home. School was not easy because of the language. He had had only a few years of basic English, and with the speed at which Americans talked, he could barely understand what they were saying. While he did better in more language-fair subjects such as math, chemistry, and physics, he had trouble with history and literature—anything that involved a lot of reading in English.

Sombath was the only Asian in all of Glenbeulah and Elkhart Lake, and perhaps it could not be helped that people stared at him. He was an oddity. “You develop some kind of complex,” he says. “You are different. People look at you because you are different and you know you are different.”

One of the things that made an impression on Sombath was the material wealth enjoyed by Americans. He marveled at the fact that Americans never worried about where to find the next meal. It was material abundance and financial security he had not thought possible. He figured that money afforded them not just things but the luxury of planning ahead, of being able to project what they would do in some future time. In Laos, there was such lack of material security that people could not even tell where the next meal would come from.

But Sombath gained insight that would stay with him for the rest of his life: “Even though materially we were poor, somehow the level of our [the Laotian’s] contentment and happiness was very high. Our social security was the family. You cannot put a cash value on this.” He started to think that the Lao and the Americans had different struggles, and that they had different measures of contentment.

HIS year abroad ended on a high note. He and his fellow AFS scholars toured the United States together before they went home. It was the only time he was able to become ‘typical’ and behave like a teenager. But his homecoming would turn out to be one of the most unpleasant—if enlightening—experiences of his life.

All of his classmates had moved to the Lycée Vientiane for senior high school by the time Sombath returned. The Lycée was the only complete high school in all of Laos. And though Sombath returned only as a junior and could have stayed one more year in Savannakhet, he opted to take his junior year at the Lycée Vientiane as well.

He already knew that his stay abroad would penalize him by a year. What he did not know was that the French teachers would see his year in America as something traitorous (against the French). Also, his American experience developed in him the confidence to question things, and he might have displayed this new assertiveness early in his return. Assertiveness ran counter to the norm in Laos, and his new confidence turned off his French teachers even more. They made no bones about it—they made their contempt plain and clear.

“For example if I were asked a question, before I could open my mouth to answer, the teacher would make fun of me. And the whole class would laugh. Or, if I pushed to get a response out, the teacher would not look at the positive side. He looked for the mistakes.” These incidents happened with such regularity that even Sombath was amazed at how he was able to last as long as he did. He was caught up in French-American animosities and was powerless to do anything about it.

Never before in his life in Laos did Sombath get less than excellent grades, much less fail his subjects. But fail he did, and he was cut off from the Lycée before he could earn a high school diploma.

This experience expanded Sombath’s awareness of himself in relation to society. His country had been in constant turmoil for most of his life. But up until then he thought these wars did not concern him; they seemed to him remote. A student was all he was, and what mattered to him was his performance. But now the fallout of political conflict hit him hard. He was no longer sheltered in his own cocoon.

Help would come, again, from the Americans. Those who taught English at the Lycée were well aware of Sombath’s predicament—as well as, of course, his capabilities. Even as he did not have a high school

diploma, they said he had done enough work to be eligible to compete for a college scholarship to the United States. Going to college in America was the last thing on his mind, but since he was facing a dead end in Laos, Sombath considered this offer serendipitous.

He won a four-year scholarship to the University of Hawaii (UH), toward a degree in secondary education, major in English as a second language (ESL). He did not really want to become a teacher of English. He was more interested in the Sciences, and hoped to shift his major, perhaps to engineering or agriculture, when the time was right.

In his first year, he lived in a house off campus, on Hilo Island. He wanted to be in a quiet neighborhood so he could concentrate on studying. But student activism was all the rage in that period, and so from his second year onward, he stayed in a student dormitory in Honolulu to be closer to the action on campus. Curiosity and a hunger for knowledge had won over his shyness. He was learning to come into his own.

This was also the time he developed a certain boldness. He began to decide for himself what courses to take. The scholarship office questioned his choice of subjects outside of Education and English. And they did not approve of his request to take a second major, or change his major entirely. He could not understand the reason for their refusal. He had proven that he could make a 3.5 Grade Point Average (GPA) despite a term load of twenty-one units. Until friends pointed it out to him, it had not occurred to him that scholarships given to Laotians were part of the American government's move to gain influence in his home country. And that he was expected to go back to Laos and teach English to help further American interests.

This triggered in Sombath a sudden and uncharacteristic wave of rebellious behavior. His interest in academics lagged. He learned to play tennis, and spent almost entire weekends on the court. "One summer I decided I was not going to attend school. I would hang out and play." He got good enough at tennis that he worked as a part-time tennis instructor. Because it was stipulated in his scholarship that he take summer courses, he did register, to satisfy the requirement. "So what I did, I registered in school and ran away. Somebody else attended class."

The next summer he got even bolder: he went all the way to San Francisco. He knew absolutely nobody there; he just walked into a hotel and applied for a job. And so while he was working as a dishwasher and exploring San Francisco on his off hours, a friend, posing as Sombath Somphone in Hawaii, attended a non-credit painting class in his name.

The administration found him out, though, and Sombath was almost sure his scholarship was going to be terminated. But an official named Mr. Nakamura was sympathetic. He said, "I don't know what to do with you. Either you're very smart or very stupid. I can't figure you out. You were sent to school but you leave it. You don't take the lessons for the course. You can get fired, terminated."

Sombath admitted his mistake, and, to his surprise, Mr. Nakamura let the matter go. But that was a close call.

HAWAII transformed Sombath. He became very sociable. He participated in social and activist groups. "I knew everybody," he says. "I took an interest in most groups, and I surveyed so many—even a Maoist group and some crazy groups like Hare Krishna—and of course I tried them all basically out of curiosity."

Sombath's adventures in student groups later developed into serious political involvements. By 1973 he had become one of the leaders of the Lao Student Association and an honorary member of the Malaysian Student Organization. He supported the cause of lepers who were unfairly treated in Honolulu; he joined rallies against nuclear armament, the dictatorships in the Philippines and South Korea; he joined Vietnam anti-war protests.

Sombath and his fellow Lao students from the University of Hawaii reached out to other Laotians studying in universities in the U.S. mainland and Canada. The year 1973 was a tumultuous time for Laos and they needed to band together if only to exchange news about their home country. The Vietnam War had dragged Laos deeper into the Indochina conflict and the intervention of foreign powers in Laos had fueled an escalation of conflicts among warring parties within the country.

Sombath eventually became a leader of the Lao student. His background—predisposed him to be a moderate. This enabled him to view the conflict in Laos more objectively. Other Lao students, on the other hand, were either on the side of the Royal Lao Army or the Pathet Lao. Sombath stood on neutral ground; he simply wanted Laos to be free of war. "I didn't want war," he said, "I wanted development."

While Sombath declares that he got politicized in Hawaii, the conclusion he formed after his Hawaii experience was that he disliked politics, and that politicians, generally, cannot be trusted.

None of the government systems in the world, he concluded then, were fair. People in power were generally corrupt. The situation then in Laos, Vietnam, and the Philippines did not inspire hope in governments and their leaders. “But I didn’t know what could be the alternative. We were ready for a change, but a change to what? I was aware that the change should not be a step backward. Change was for improvement and to have a better system than what existed. But what was that system? Who would be in charge? Would he be not corrupt like any one else? So that was the big question. I had no answer. But basically I mistrusted all politicians. That was [my] conclusion.”

When Sombath earned his bachelor’s degree in secondary education from the University of Hawaii in 1975, he was ready to go home. “I was determined to go back, pack my things and ship them back to Laos,” he says. But then his parcels were returned to him because there was no working postal system in Laos to receive them. And news had it that scores of Laotians were fleeing their war-torn country. It was a matter that shocked and saddened him. But he had to be practical—he had to accept that it was not a good time to go home.

He decided to apply with the graduate program in agriculture, this time as a paying student. He enrolled part time, and took on jobs to support himself. He bused tables at a Waikiki restaurant and taught English as a second language (ESL) to Asian immigrants.

It was at this time that Sombath met Shui-meng Ng, a Singaporean who would eventually be his wife. She was a student-activist who was studying sociology on the Manoa campus of UH.

Meanwhile, his family was living in Tha Khek. His mother was making charcoal out of scrap wood she got from local sawmills, and she peddled these from a cart in the streets of Tha Khek. His younger siblings had stopped going to school because of the war. Sombath knew he would return to them and to the country to contribute what he could to improve the lot of his family and his countrymen.

SOMBATH did not know what to expect in his country when he visited Laos in 1979. In 1975, the Americans had pulled out of Vietnam, and in the same year, the Pathet Lao gained control of Laos and established the Lao People’s Democratic Republic.

Sombath’s father was back with the family in Tha Khek when Sombath returned. But it was not to be a very happy reunion. The country was worse off than ever before. His father was angry with the Pathet Lao and worried that the Pathet Lao would send Sombath off to a re-education camp and not allow him to leave the country again.

Many did not think it was possible for Sombath to leave Laos again to follow up on his graduate studies. But while he had to go through months of persistent follow-ups, he was able to get a passport and a permit to travel back to Hawaii. Thereafter, he visited Laos every year until he could return for good.

His trips to Laos made conservative Laotians suspicious of his loyalties. He was thought of as a communist, and was a virtual outcast in the Lao community in Honolulu. His students boycotted his ESL classes, and this led to his resignation from teaching. Back in Laos, the Pathet Lao suspected him of being an agent of the U.S. Central Intelligence Agency (CIA). The US government also came close to blacklisting him after he refused a green card. But despite all these setbacks, Sombath managed to finish his master’s degree in 1980 and immediately moved on to the Ph. D. program.

For his doctoral studies, Sombath worked in agronomy and soil science—an area of study important to Laos, which is mainly an agricultural economy. Research priorities at the time looked towards increasing production yields, and along this line Sombath’s studies took him to such centers of rice research as the Philippines. What his studies told him, though, was that high outputs were a direct result of high inputs. As he well knew, Lao farmers neither had adequate irrigation nor the capacity to purchase pesticides and chemical fertilizers. He was therefore keen on conducting intensive research on organic fertilizers instead.

He argued with his professors about the bias in favor of mechanization, new seed varieties, pesticides, and chemical-intensive approaches, saying that the farmers cannot afford such inputs and that this would only foster loan dependence on the part of the farmers and the Lao government. Sombath insisted on his ideas. “I

was going organic and chemical-free. I was again running against the current. My political sympathies ran against the mainstream, as did my research.”

In the end, it was Sombath who gave up just as he had taken a first crack at his dissertation. “I just dropped it. In the end I’d had enough of the laboratory, enough of graphics, enough of presentations. My wife warned me—she was my girlfriend at that time—that I was going to regret it if I didn’t complete my dissertation, but I just could not take it anymore. It was pushing me backwards. So I walked out.”

Sombath pursued his research on organic fertilizers outside of the program. He was on his own from 1980 to 1983, traveling from Hawaii to Laos frequently. People around him continued to suspect his political agenda on these trips. Those in Laos thought he was a CIA operative; in America he was thought of as a communist. “In this period I moved back and forth a lot, because I was doing my field studies. I did a lot of greenhouse studies in Hawaii, but there is a limit to such studies. Greenhouse work is not really that reliable unless you test it in the field, so I tested it in the field on my own, with no assistance.”

And despite the suspicions his frequent travels aroused, Sombath went back and forth to Laos, sometimes staying in Laos four to six months at a time. “I did not think the greenhouses in Hawaii were adequate enough to test how plants would grow in the real world,” he says. Sombath was testing *Azolla*, a water fern plant that could be used as an organic fertilizer that he had come across in his travels to other Southeast Asian countries. He was keen on introducing its use to farmers in Laos. He did all these studies on his own steam until he received a grant from the Christopher Reynolds Foundation in 1983.

SOMBATH married Shui-Meng that same year. She had been appointed senior researcher at the Institute of Southeast Studies (ISEAS) in Singapore. Sombath stayed with her there for about six months until the funding for his research came through and he could move back to Laos for good. “As a scholar, she’s quite respected in her area. I admire her courage to quit the job and join me in [returning to] a country with no future.” She moved with him to Vientiane.

He had, in the course of his field studies, consolidated his findings on the agricultural situation in Laos and from this had designed in 1980 the Rice-Based Integrated Farm System. It was a more sustainable system of farming that included vegetables, beans, fruits, fish, and fowl. Sombath explains, “I was focusing more on food security because I saw food shortage and starvation. First, rice is a staple food, so I helped in rice production by introducing *Azolla*. That’s more for my research, but as I was doing my field research I realized that [Lao agriculture was] rice-based. Rice was the main thing, but you cannot just survive on rice. You have to have other things to grow with your rice.”

Sombath’s vision was to train agriculture personnel on integrated farming in both the upland and the lowland areas of Laos. These intensive training projects, of course, needed government approval and private funding. He worked with foreign agencies such as the Quaker Service and the American Friends Service Committee. “They submitted my proposal to the Lao government for me and embedded in it my role as technical consultant, says Sombath.” But it took the Lao government years to approve a single project.

“They didn’t know what to do with me. I was not from the government, I was not from a military family, and I’m not a revolutionary. I studied in the U.S. So they didn’t know what to do with me. Every time I requested something, no one could make a decision. It took two or more years to get things approved. And that time was very uncertain for me, waiting for approval,” recalls Sombath.

In 1985, with no project approvals forthcoming, Sombath accepted an offer from United Nations Children’s Fund (Unicef) to work as consultant and nutrition in Cambodia. He was still based in Vientiane, going to Cambodia for a month at a time, three or four times a year. “My heart was still in Laos, but my skills were not being recognized there, so I worked somewhere else.”

But it was in Cambodia that Sombath first developed the organizational expertise of getting government departments and NGOs to work together on a single mission. “Because when you go to the rural areas, they don’t see different ministries. (Their concerns were how) to get food on the plate, how to get their kids to school, and how to take care of their health problems. They didn’t see it in terms of sectors. So I was trying to pull these authorities together. It was better when they worked as a team.”

His work with Unicef went well. Sombath earned such admiration and respect in Cambodia that its government sent an official letter to the Lao government thanking them for sending “such a competent expert” to their country. This communication opened the eyes of people in the highest levels of authority in

Laos, and soon enough, they approved Sombath's pending project proposals. It was time for Sombath to work again for his country, after three years of waiting.

The integrated farming system was still high on Sombath's agenda when he returned to Laos in 1989. By then, he had fully developed the program and renamed it Rice-based Integrated Farm System Project. Implementing the project exposed him to the world of rural Laos and to the complex obstacles faced by development workers in the country. When he tried to institutionalize it and make it a part of the government apparatus, he met with much resistance from politicians who preferred high agricultural output numbers. The politicians wanted high GDP/GNP statistics that would help them politically, even though this could not be sustained in the long run.

Sombath decided to approach the matter from the bottom up. He got the Participatory Development in Communities project underway, using Unicef as institutional platform to get approval from the government. Unicef funded the project of linking the Rice-Based Integrated Farm System with the Department of Agriculture through the Participatory Development in Communities Project. It took five years to set it up, but he was able to link it with the national budget, implementing the system from the village level to the district level.

"But that kind of integrated rural development bottom-up planning was not sustainable in the sense that to implement the idea, I needed a team of very well trained government officials. I had to rely on government officials because there's no way they're going to allow me to run an organization that big. And also I had no intention and no desire to run such a big organization. I would not enjoy it. I prefer to be creative, initiate something, and let somebody else do the work from there. That's my strategy— demonstrate that something is workable and then mainstream it in the government system. That has always been my intention," declares Sombath.

But there was little hope in the government employees. These were men and women in their thirties who were resistant to new paradigms, and so it took all of two years to train them. Worse, after two years of intensive training, they would be moved to other assignments, and new people—with no training—would be assigned to work with the project. "So with these two problems, I said, the system would not work. So then the idea of sending out volunteers came into play, that was back in 1995."

The training of fresh university graduates to become volunteers did not work either. Sombath found them to be "flat," inadequately educated, and unable to think for themselves, much less do analysis or exercise judgment.

By this time, his wife Shui-Meng working with Unicef-Laos. Apart from her sociological expertise, she would be a sobering influence amidst Sombath's increasing frustration and impatience. According to him, "I guess my understanding of the system had much to do with my wife educating me. She's a sociologist. I'm a technical person. I usually would not understand, and I have no tolerance for such things, but she would help me along and explain. 'Look at the history of the country. How many people like you left to go to other schools? You went to the U.S. and then came back. How can you expect all the people to follow your ideas? You have to understand that.' So that kind of gave me the courage to stick to what I was doing."

The failure of training government personnel and fresh graduates led Sombath to set up a special training program for university students. He tried to set up a government-sanctioned organization for this, but his proposals were largely ignored. "I don't know how many times I've submitted proposals. They just kept coming back. No decision. All the way up, they just came back down."

WHEN Prime Minister Khamtai Suphandon passed a decree in 1996 allowing for the creation of private schools in Laos, Sombath jumped at the opportunity and set up Participatory Development Training Center (PADETC) as a non-profit private school in Vientiane.

Registered with the Ministry of Education, PADETC is the only officially recognized organization of its kind in the country. Starting with a group of five development workers experienced in agriculture and participatory approaches, it has since expanded to a full-time staff of forty-three and a large corps of volunteers and trainees.

PADETC has undertaken numerous initiatives in promoting eco-friendly technologies and micro- enterprises, including the introduction of organic fertilizers, garbage recycling, fuel-efficient stoves, and new processing techniques for small agribusiness enterprises. These initiatives are undertaken as part of a learning program

for teams of young volunteers and trainees (high school, college, and graduate levels). Through PADETC, the youth are afforded opportunities for learning leadership, teamwork, and project management as well as a diverse range of life-based, locally-grounded knowledge in areas like environmental awareness, good farming practices, entrepreneurship, and urgent social issues like drug- abuse prevention.

If PADETC has focused on the youth it is because, knowing that more than half of the country's population is under twenty, Sombath recognizes that the formation of the youth is crucial to social change in Laos.

Running PADETC and engaging with the youth provided Sombath a view of the Lao educational system from up close. It was a very traditional way of education, he says, one that was rigid and outmoded and did not promote creative thinking. The curriculum, he believed, did not educate students in a holistic sense. It lacked life-skills training, did not offer the opportunity to explore different areas of knowledge, or develop multiple-intelligences. Moreover, it did not develop "the heart", Sombath says.

"I'm using the word heart. Our education system doesn't bring out the goodness of people's hearts. They teach people to be more competitive but less caring."

Sombath says the more difficult phase of launching the program was making his staff and volunteers understand the rationale for PADETC, since they themselves had been part of a system that standardized knowledge and intelligence. "The teachers and the principals were not open-minded about the [PADETC] system. They were not used to a participatory process, not used to discovery learning and activity-based learning. So I was really fighting for a new dimension, a new mindset," he says.

Sombath widened PADETC's reach to students in all levels. It was the only promising means to effect change in the next generation of Laotians. PADETC now involves kids as young as six, from the primary school level. Sombath calls the method 'peer education,' where students learn not only from their teachers and elders but also from children their own age. The PADETC curriculum stimulates interests in fields other than what are offered in the regular schools. They go on immersion trips where they do their own planning. They perform for, and then engage with, people outside their own communities. This, Sombath believes, introduces a sense of responsibility and develops the "heart."

FIFTY-four-year-old Sombath Somphone realizes full well that he cannot change Laos in his lifetime. Still, he knows that he will do whatever he can to give back to the country from which he had taken. Giving what he can to Laos, no matter how small, he says, "gives meaning to my life."

Socorro A. Villanueva

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