

HISTORY OF THE CATHOLIC CHURCH IN LAOS & HMONG ROMANIZED PHONETIC ALPHABET

Although multiple attempts were made to spread the gospel to the Hmong in Asia, the most well known and successful was that of an Oblat of the Immaculate Heart priest named Yves Bertrais (Txiv Plig Nyiaj Pov).

In addition to a plethora of books recording and documenting the Hmong culture, he is most known for co-creating the widely used Hmong Romanized Popular Alphabet text (RPA). He worked tirelessly with Hmong people for over 55 years.



STORY BY LONG HER
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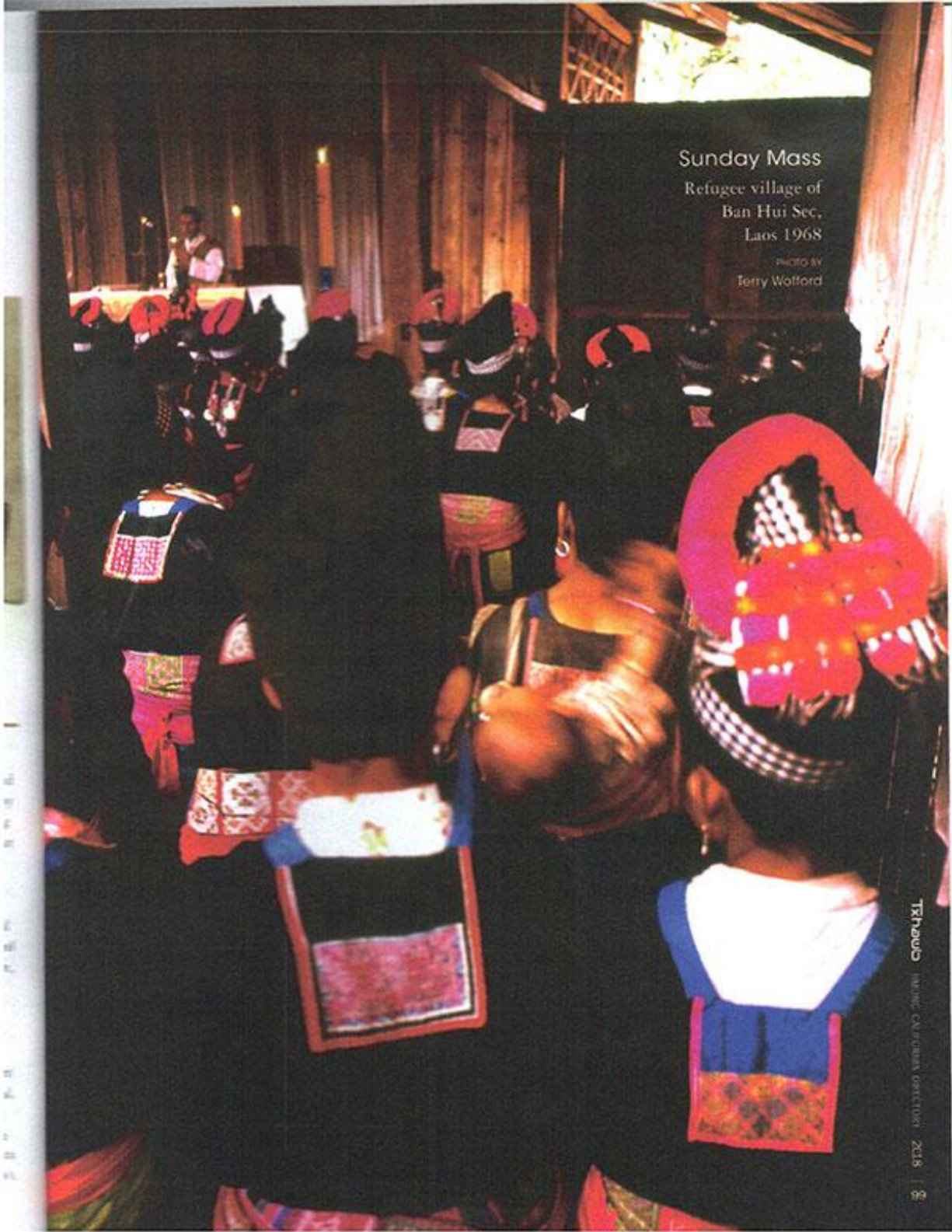
The Hmong community is indebted to his extensive work to document the culture. This article uses multiple narratives and oral accounts that were translated from Hmong to English to provide a summary of his early history and how the RPA text came to fruition. Narratives from Father Bertrais are excerpts from his book, "Tsim Ntawv Hmoob Thoob Teb Zoo Li Cas?"

TXIV PLIG NYIAJ POV WAS BORN ON JULY 29, 1921 IN NANTES, FRANCE.

He received his religious calling to the priesthood at the age of 12 and was ordained at the age of 25. On December 23, 1947, he left his native France for Laos and resided in Paksan and Luang Prabang for several years, mainly learning the Lao language. Given the choice to preach to native Lao, Dao, Mien or Miao (Hmong was not a term he was aware of at the onset), he chose the Hmong and immediately left for the village of Kiu Katiam (Roob Nyuj Qus) on April 17, 1950.

Full of desire to immediately immerse into the culture yet completely lacking the skills to survive, he blindly approached the village and asked for refuge. He was eventually taken in by a local shaman and keng (qeej) master named Cher Chue Yang (Yaj Txawj Tswb) and his son Za Yang (Yaj Zam Nob). Without resources and money to hire help, he requested that his hosts ask villagers to teach and help him build shelter. He quickly fell in love with the hospitable culture and humble people. Convinced that preservation of culture and language was vital to thriving and persevering as a community, he quickly learned the language and documented Hmong religion, history, culture, and songs – without regard to his own religious beliefs.

He would later write multiple respective books and volumes. During this period, he had 3 Hmong youth guides live with him: Yeng Yang, Hue Thao, and Houa Cha. They showed him the daily routines of Hmong life and the necessities for survival. In return, he provided medical care to the village and taught them the Lao and French languages. Reciprocally, they began teaching him Hmong. In 1951, elders formally welcomed him to the village by giving him the name "Nhia Pao" (Nyiaj Pov).



Sunday Mass

Refugee village of
Ban Hui Sec,
Laos 1968

PHOTO BY
Terry Wolford

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As witnessed on multiple accounts, it was not uncommon for Father Bertrais to be found sitting along side of Cher Chue Yang as he performed Shaman rituals. Many times, Father Bertrais would pray or say Catholic Mass next to him after rituals.

On one occasion, multiple members in Cher Chue Yang's family were sick and could not be healed using Shaman rituals. They turned to Father Bertrais for prayers and western medicine. This was the first of many small steps that would lead to their conversion. In 1952, the first 3 Hmong were baptized into the Catholic faith in Laos - Cher Chue Yang, Za Yang, and Cha Thao (Thoj Tshav Ntxaij).

Father Bertrais would later continue to do extensive documentation on Hmong culture and formed the Hmong Cultural Heritage Association. In 1952 and 1953, he assisted in formally developing the RPA text, the more widely used writing system by the Hmong today. He opened many schools across Laos and paved a path for many Hmong scholars to obtain higher education not otherwise available.

ON TXIV PLIG NYIAJ POV ARRIVING IN ROOB NYUJ QUS (KIU KATIAM):

He arrived with a guide but came absolutely unprepared. He did not have any shelter. We had never seen a white skinned person before. We did not understand why a Catholic priest wearing a collar would want to come live in our village. No one wanted to help him. Eventually my father took him in.

- PAJ LIS YAJ

younger brother to Zam Nob Yaj

We had heard of a white skinned person in the village. We heard that he had medicine that could fix ailments we were unable to. Elders in the village had forbidden us to get close to him, much less convert to his religion. The families that did eventually convert became outcasts. We were told not to court their daughters.

- CHUE HER

Kiu Kattiam villager

There are many reasons why my family converted. We were the first converts. He had helped the village many times with western medicine and injections. What really brought our conversion was this: near our village was a region that was well known to be haunted by spirits. Everyone in the village avoided that region. No one crossed that mountain.

We challenged him to prove the strength of his God by spending one night on that mountain. He agreed. He came back the next day unharmed and smiling.

-PAJ LIS YAJ

younger brother to Zam Nob Yaj



YVES BERTRAIS (Txiv Plig Nyiaj Pov)

Learning Hmong was not easy because a written language did not exist. During the first month, I began creating the text based on the French alphabet. The three boys that were with me were happy to learn it. That first version of the text, I used for 3 years.

In the village, I had friends that were about 30 years old, like myself. In the evening, I would speak to them and ask about Hmong culture. They would tell me stories (dab neeg). I would write them down on paper.

- FATHER YVES BERTRAIS, Txiv Plig Nyiaj Pov

(Txim Nkawv Hmoob Tsoob Tsoo Li Cas)



In the evenings, Txiv Plig Nyiaj Pov would come and teach us how to write in Hmong. We were very surprised how he was able to learn our language and then teach it to us. Some nights there were very few of us. Other nights the whole house would be full.

- PAJ LIS YAJ,
younger brother to Zam Nob Yaj

THE ORIGINS OF THE HMONG ROMANIZED PHONETIC ALPHBET

YVES BERTRAIS (Txiv Plig Nyiaj Pov)

During the time I began building my house in Roob Nyuj Qus, 80 kilometers from Luang Prabang, I heard that in Xieng Khouang, about 250 kilometers to the East, there was an American Protestant spreading the gospel to Hmong villages. He had created his own Hmong text also. I had not met him yet.

In March of 1953, I spent a few days in Luang Prabang and I met another American Protestant named Roff. I said to him:

"There is an American Protestant in Xieng Khouang. He has created a Hmong text. I am in Luang Prabang and I have

created a Hmong text also. Not long from now, you will be teaching your Hmong text over there and I will be teaching my Hmong text here. We have two different texts. In the future, the Hmong of Laos will have two different texts. Is it possible for us to meet and agree on one text for use in writing Hmong? This will be best for the Hmong."

Mr. Roff heard me and agreed. After a few days, he informed me that arrangements were made for us to meet in Luang Prabang. He added that he invited a linguist also. I told him that I was inviting two young Hmong men. Since we wanted to create a Hmong text, it would be appropriate to have some Hmong with us because they spoke more clearly for the linguist to hear. In April of 1953, we met for one week in Luang Prabang. The participants present included:

- MR. BARNEY, a Protestant evangelist from Xieng Khouang. He was learning the Green dialect of Hmong. He has created his own text. He taught the vowel tones using numbers. (For example: kuv mus ua teb = ku3 mu2 ua4 te7.)

-MR. SMALLEY, a linguist and phonetic expert. He did not know the Hmong language.

- TWO YOUNG HMONG MEN:
YENG YANG AND HUE THAO.
They both lived with me in Roob Nyuj Qus for 3 years. They knew how to write using my text. I used vowel tone markers as follows: K'u mu us te.



Hmong Catholics at Long Cheng Base in Laos early 1970 Dr Yang Dao Collection

-AND THERE WAS MYSELF. By that time I had recorded a significant amount of Hmong in the White dialect. I had 3,000 pages and was preparing to create a Hmong to French dictionary. We met for 3 days. Mr. Smalley examined the text used by Mr. Barney in Xieng Khouang. He examined the text that I used in Luang Prabang. He asked the two Hmong men to clearly speak to his ear - for him to hear very clearly.

THERE WERE 3 REQUIREMENTS OF THE NEW TEXT:

1. Only use characters available on the English typewriter.
2. Create a text that is compatible with Phonetic rules such that a logical system would exist
3. In creating tone markers, do not use numbers because it is difficult to read

We designated Mr. Smalley as the expert to finish the final work. By the fifth day the work was complete. We agreed that, from that point onward, we would use that text and there would be no further modifications. White and Green dialects would use the same text. Afterwards, we named this Hmong text: Hmong Text RPA, derived from Romanized Popular Alphabet.

- FATHER YVES BERTRAIS, TXIV PLIG NYIAJ POV
(Tsim Ntawv Hmoob Thoob Teb Zoo Li Cas?)

FATHER BERTRAIS IS KNOWN FOR THE FOLLOWING QUOTE:

"Ib haiv neeg uas yus nyiam lawv tsis tag
yus siab ntsws, yus ciaj tsis taus lawv haiv,
paub tsis tau lawv cov lus, tuag tsis taus
rau lawv pam.

Kuv nyiam nej haiv Hmoob..."

("If you do not love a people with all your heart,
you cannot become one of them,
cannot know their language, and
cannot be buried by them.
I love the Hmong...")

On May 27, 2007, Father Bertrais passed in his native country of France and, as requested, was buried by French Hmong with incorporation of traditional Hmong customs.