

First, though, back to that alphabet, in particular the consonants. We'll start with the consonants because they're the basic foundation of every syllable in Lao. There are 27 basic consonants in modern Lao. Note that one consonant (ຮ) was once considered somewhat obsolete (though you'll see it in many pre-War texts and you need to know it), and in fact it represents a sound not present in any spoken Lao dialect, except in loan words. There are also 6 special combined pairs of consonants. Three of these have special forms which are sometimes used instead of the written pair. This will all become clear in time, so don't worry too much about it now. But as you can see, it can be difficult giving an exact number of the number of consonants in Lao. Below is a list of all basic Lao consonants:

ກ ຂ ຄ ງ  
ຈ ສ ຊ ຍ  
ດ ຕ ຖ ທ ນ  
ບ ປ ຜ ຝ ພ ມ  
ຢ ຣ ລ ວ ຫ ອ ຮ

For right now we're omitting the various special pairs and combined forms I mentioned above. The reasons for this will become clear soon. Also, the way I've arranged the consonants above, while it does follow accepted Lao dictionary order of the alphabet, is a bit unorthodox, and you're unlikely to see the consonants listed in exactly this same way elsewhere. There are specific reasons I've arranged the consonants in this way, and I think this arrangement is going to help your basic un-

derstanding of the qualities of various groups or types of consonant: so bear with me and keep reading! For now, just pay attention to the consonants on the previous page, and don't look at the consonant chart in the Multimedia Materials, unless you're asked to, okay? As you may have noticed, the presentation of the consonants in Multimedia Lesson One is a bit different than the chart on the previous page.

The way I've arranged the consonants on the previous page has an historical precedent: it follows the traditional and highly logical presentation of the alphabet in all Indian syllabic writing systems. This type of system was the model for written Lao, as well as for Thai and Khmer. In fact, the Lao writing system (as well as Thai) was derived in large part from Khmer, which preceded both. In this Indic system of presenting an alphabet, the majority of the consonants are arranged according to where your tongue produces the consonants' sounds in your mouth...ingenious, huh? And it makes much more sense than the random "a, b, c, d..." of English and the Romance languages. For starters, let's concentrate on the consonants in the top section on the preceding page, and let's look at selected consonants in the first six columns of consonants. These are called the STOP consonants:

ກ ຂ ຄ

ຈ

ດ ຕ ຖ ທ

ບ ປ ຜ ພ

Stop consonants are those sounds that involve the stopping of air by doing something with your mouth, usually involving your tongue. They are "hard" sounds. In English, the stop consonants are b, d, k, p, and t, though most of these can have several different sounds depending on where they're placed in a word. Now, go back to your Course Multimedia Materials and click on only the consonants you see written on the previous page--the stop consonants--to see how they sound.

See how they all have a “hard” sound? They all involve the stopping of air, in the first three rows by touching your tongue to various places in your mouth, and in the fourth row by stopping air with your lips. Listen to the sounds again, and repeat the sounds following the example of the recording. Do this several times until you make sure you’re making the same sounds as the recording on the Multimedia consonant chart.

Now, here’s something interesting about these sounds, and the reason they’re arranged the way they are (in rows): notice, when you’re making the sounds in the first row, where your tongue touches in your mouth. It’s pretty far back there, right? The place in your mouth where your tongue touches to stop the air in order to make those sounds is called the “velum;” and those are called “velar consonants.” Now, it’s not necessary for you to remember that term, “velar,” but you should be conscious of the fact that to make the sounds in the first row of Lao consonants, your tongue needs to touch that area in the back of your mouth. Practice saying each consonant sound, following the recorded example, until you’re clear on this point.

Now move to the second row. You’ll notice there’s only one stop consonant there. Click on this consonant on your Multimedia Lesson One consonant chart to see how it’s pronounced, and pronounce it yourself. Pay attention to where your tongue touches in your mouth. A lot further forward, right? just above the top of your teeth. That’s called your “soft palate,” and the consonant in this row is called a “palatal stop.” There’s only one because modern Lao only has one palatal stop. In the past, it probably had more, like Thai and other languages related to Lao have today. Plus, the various Indian languages that this system was originally derived for all had several palatal stops, hence the existence of a whole row dedicated to this place in the mouth.

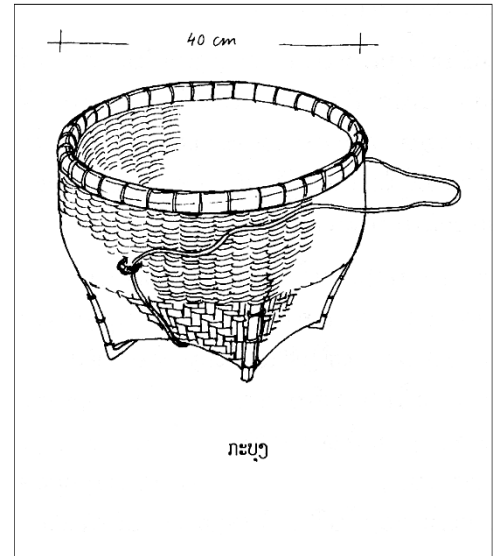
Now move down to the third row on the previous page. Click on each of these consonants on your Multimedia Lesson consonant chart to hear how they sound, and then pronounce each of them yourself. Notice that now your tongue has moved down to your teeth, you need to touch your tongue on your teeth to make these sounds. They’re called “dental stops” for this reason. And notice something else that’s happened: from the first



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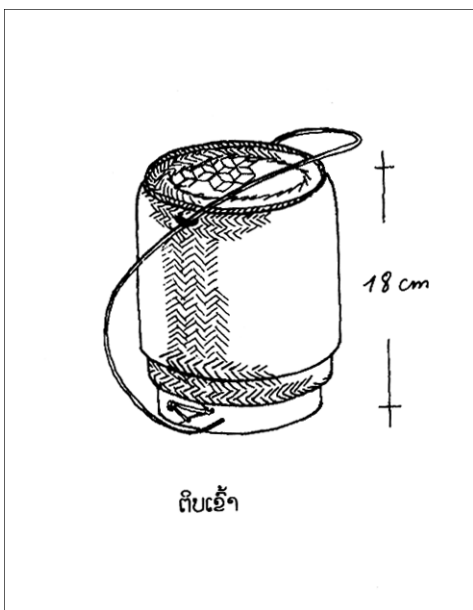
to the third row, your tongue has moved progressively forward in your mouth, starting at the “velum” in the back, then to your soft palate, now to your teeth. Quite ingenious, ey?

In the fourth row, we come to consonants in which your tongue is not involved at all, now it’s your lips that stop the air. Listen to the sounds in the Multimedia Materials and pronounce them yourself to confirm this. These are the “labial stops.” As you can see, this knowledge can be quite a useful tool in remembering which written Lao consonant produces which sound.



Now for some more useful knowledge about the way the consonants are organized. Look at the first consonant in the first row, which is ກ . Make sure you know how to pronounce it. Now move to the next consonant, ຂ , and also the third consonant, ຄ . The sound of the first consonant in the row compared to the other two is similar, yet different, isn’t it? We say that the first consonant is “unaspirated,” and the second and third are “aspirated.” Aspiration is that little extra puff of air you produce to make the sound of the second and third consonant. Make sure you’re hearing this in the Multimedia Lesson recording and that you’re producing the sounds correctly yourself.

The one sound in the second row (ຈ) is an unaspirated consonant, kind of halfway between “ch” and “j” in English. Notice that modern Lao has no aspirated palatal stops, sounds we would think



of as “ch” sounds in English. If this sound did exist in Lao, the consonants representing it would be in this row. Now, there are many words of Sanskrit, Pali, Khmer and Thai which have been adopted into Lao or that Lao shares with Thai as a fellow Tai family language that begin with an aspirated palatal stop (that “ch” sound). These sounds are represented in modern Lao with more of an “s” sound, but we’ll get to this in a moment. For now just confirm to yourself, using the recording on the Multimedia Lesson, that ຈ is an unaspirated palatal consonant.

Now move down to the third row, but be careful: the third and



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fourth row contain an “extra” consonant each that appears as the first consonant in those rows. Ignore that consonant ( ດ ) for now and listen to the sound of the second consonant in the row, ຕ, on your clickable consonant chart; also pronounce the sound yourself. For English speakers this sound, and also the sound of the unaspirated velar stop ກ, can be quite problematic. In English, we have these sounds, but they only exist as the second consonant in a word, never as the first. When velar and dental consonants come first in English words, they’re always aspirated. Not so in Lao.

You should already be able to predict how the next two consonants in the third row, ຖ and ທ will sound: they’re aspirated dental stops. Compare their sound with the sound of the consonant ຕ, which we just discussed above.

One more row to go to illustrate the unaspirated/aspirated consonant difference: the fourth row, the labial stops. Remember to skip the first consonant again, and focus on the second, ບ. Listen to its sound on the Multimedia consonant chart, pronounce it yourself, and then compare it with the sound of the next two, aspirated consonants, ຝ and ພ.

Now let’s get back to those two consonants that we ignored above, the first consonant in the third row, and then the first in the fourth row. There’s something a little different about these that leads us to consider them separately from the rest of the consonants we’ve been discussing.

## The Voiced Consonants: ຕ and ບ

The first consonant in the third (dental) row represents an unaspirated dental stop just like ຕ does,

except that in the case of ດ the sound is what we call voiced. To hear the difference, go to your Course CD-ROM alphabet chart again and compare the sounds of ຕ and ດ. Hear the difference? It's basically the difference between a “d” sound and an unaspirated “t” sound (though remember, we don't have the latter initially in English words).

A similar relationship exists in the fourth row, labial stop consonants, between ບ and ປ. The former, ບ, represents a “voiced” labial stop, a “b” type sound, and the second consonant, ປ, is an unaspirated “p” sound. Once again, the sound of ປ gives non- native speakers of Lao quite a bit of difficulty, as it's not a sound we have at the beginning of words in English.

## Final Stop Consonants in Lao

Up until now, we've been discussing initial Lao stop consonants. That is, we've been talking about stop consonants which begin syllables. Remember, the basic building block of Lao words is the syllable...every syllable has its own consonant, its own vowel, and its own tone. (Keep in mind, though, that a word in Lao can have several syllables, especially words of Sanskrit and Pali origin. )We also need to consider the stop consonants that END syllables. This is actually very simple: there are only three of them in modern written Lao: ກ , ດ and ປ . All final stop sounds in Lao syllables are represented in writing by these three consonants, though sometimes a final “glottal stop” (don't worry, in a bit we'll discuss what that is) is represented by a vowel symbol instead of a consonant symbol. Things were not always this simple; both the current People's Democratic Republic Lao government and the pre-1975 Royal Lao Government enacted reforms to simplify the Lao writing system. Previously, other stop consonants could be used at the end of syllables as



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well, and you will need to recognize these when you're reading older texts.

And now here's another assignment for you to get better acquainted with the stop consonants in Lao: look at the photographs of book covers and signs on the next two pages. Try to pick out stop consonants you've learned so far. I suggest you do this by picking one consonant, say, ກ , and then look through all the photos for every occurrence of this consonant that you can find. Then do the same with another consonant, and so on. At every stage of your learning to read Lao, you should practice recognizing the letters or words you're learning in real-life contexts: that's why all these photos of signs and other examples of text in everyday life in Laos today are in this textbook. Make good use of them!



Happy New Year!