

**An Acculturation Process:
Southeast Asians in Bowling Green**

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27 April 1989

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It looked like most any American home; the living room is carpeted, the sofa and loveseat clean with floral designs, and an entertainment center console is equipped with television, phonograph, tape player and speakers. Two young girls struggling over the remote control change the thirty-odd channels back and forth between the afternoon's cartoons. Their English is like any child's at the ages of three and six. They read aloud junk mail advertisements brought by the mailman. As I sit on the sofa waiting for their father to return from work, their mother speaks to them in her native Laos. They turn to listen and then return to play. Their mother laughs as the two girls squirm on the carpeted floor. Are they already "American," I wonder? Their father returns and the television goes mute as they smile and sit quietly.

Like immigrants who have settled in the United States before them, this Laotian family has probably worked hard to fit in among strangers called neighbors. This Laotian family has already acquired the material possessions and aspirations similar to their neighbors. Their children go to public schools, win spelling bees, and art contests; their parents may work in a nearby factory or university.

This paper will examine some of the customs and rites of passage that are practiced by Laotian families who have settled in Bowling Green. Some of their customs have changed dramatically during their time of acculturation into mainstream

American culture. Although they may still practice some customs in a traditional manner, many customs have been westernized as time passes. While doing my fieldwork I began to notice this merging of traditions. As an anthropologist, Claude Levi-Strauss may have seen this as a natural variant of two sets of customs meshing together to create a new custom. He would call this act a bricolage. This paper will illustrate the merging of Eastern and Western customs by utilizing personal interviews and observations with selected Laotian residents in Bowling Green, Kentucky.

Although Pane Sananikone only arrived in Bowling Green three years ago this April, he already has a nice home and a new car. While I was waiting for him to come home one afternoon, his wife commented about her job. She had just gotten off work and had picked up her children from school. She sat in the loveseat and replied to my question of whether or not she likes it here in Bowling Green. "Yes, I like it very much, but you must work very hard." She works in a manufacturing plant earning around nine dollars a hour. Pane and his wife, as all of the people I interviewed, like it here in the United States, but are concerned about obtaining good jobs and restructuring their lives after the turmoil in their homeland. They express concern about how much their lives have changed, and how their customs and children will be effected by this change. Wedding ceremonies, funerals, and folk beliefs have all been effected during the acculturation of becoming an American.

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Dett Chanthalangsy recently got married in Bridgeport, Connecticut in a traditional wedding. One reason why he had traveled so far to get married was because most of his immediate family and close friends are living there. As Dett said, "Because, it is one time only we marry, not two times. We need the people to come and know. We marry; we invited my cousins, my friends anywhere. Let them know." For Dett and other Laotians, family and friends are an imperative to bond the couple together. The wedding is essentially a gathering of friends that witness the acknowledged union of the couple. As Dett commented:

No, we have the old man-- my daddy, my uncle and my aunt. We had a table, thirty feet. You know, and man is my witness, on my side, both sides I need you, if you want me to come sign this paper, because we confess, you know, both sides.

During a traditional ceremony the bride and groom sit together on the floor. The elder or monk recites a story about how the man should treat his wife and how they should live together for the rest of their lives and die together. Sometimes holy water is used to dip the bride and groom's hand in. Following this, guests typically tie money to their hands with white string.

Another important factor in the wedding is the sharing of the cost of the ceremony. Traditionally, friends and family donate money to the ceremony by taking a string which was attached to a flower and tie bills to the wrists of the couple. Like Americans, Laotians believe that the wedding ceremony should be filled with food and drink along with a band of

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musicians, if there is enough money. Dett's cousins provided a band for his ceremony.

Recently I attended a Laotian wedding. However, due to bad timing and much confusion I missed the ceremony but got there for the reception following. While I was there a man came up to me and asked how I liked the party. He then commented about the band equipment and members, saying that although they did not appear traditional, the music and songs were. Also, the dancing was traditional but had a faster movement because of the electric instruments and the energy of the youthful band members. As the younger people danced with more swing and vigilance, the older people seemed to have blocked out the loud noise and faster beat, and moved slowly around the floor. I thought that this scene was not so different from what one would find at any American dance that had older and younger people attending. The tradition was mutual, only the speed had changed. The man who commented on this did not seem to mind the electric band and faster pace, and seemed pleased the new styles could merge with the old.

The traditional dress for the ceremony, worn by both husband and wife, is called a sarong. Typically it is a white dress-like-skirt which leaves one shoulder bare. The color white is most often used because it is associated with good luck. These skirts are usually kept within the family, but recent immigrants having lost theirs can borrow them from friends. This was the case for Dett and Veuy.

In their ceremony, the bride wore a beautiful yellow sequine

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dress that was tight fitting and fell to her ankles. The groom wore a grey suit. I am not sure whether these were worn during the wedding, or if they changed clothing for the reception.

A Laotian marriage, unlike an American one, does not typically require a licensed document. For Dett and others, friends and family serve as witnesses. This acts as a contractual agreement between the couple. Because of this, their marriage is made known within the community. Here in the United States, a paper that acknowledges the Laotian ceremony is sometimes read aloud and signed by the husband and wife. As Dett stated, "This is enough; this is good":

What's on the paper, is meaning that me and my wife stay together. Everybody knows, for Laotian; but American people they don't know. Yes, for our culture it is a different way. We don't have license yet. But my way we have, yes, we have. The people know you; it is okay. That is good.

At the end of the interview Dett expressed concern about the laws governing marriage in the United States. As with others I have interviewed, recent immigrants are worried that some of their customs and practices are not allowed here in the United States. Although Dett does not have an official marriage license, he did mention that he may go to the church and receive one. Dett seems to be aware of the customs of both cultures, which preconceives his decision in choosing customs to practice. One way of coping with the pressures of retaining their own customs, and trying to fit into mainstream America is to practice both.

Yes, but one thing-- we came here with ourself; it is important. Like some people came here; the situation between American and Laotian. We try to become American

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citizen, but first thing we never forgot life. We have respect. I have respect for my Buddhism; but we came here and we cannot change. But we know we will pick up some style, some other American ways. That is the best way for us to do, but we try. But we cannot change in a year, we cannot pick it up. And we are too old, not too young. We were not born in the United States that way. Because of respect

It is not certain which customs will fade away and which will be kept, or how traditions will merge, but it is assured that people will adhere to certain customs as different needs arise.

One interesting custom seems to be prevailing even though the necessity is no longer warranted. Each of the people I talked with, and others I have heard about, have been married in the United States or in Laos in either December or April. The reason for this is that in Laos these were good times because of the planting and harvesting seasons. December and April afford more free time to the farmer and rural person. This free time is needed so everyone who is invited to the wedding may be able to agree upon an appropriate time and day for all to meet and enjoy the ceremony. It would be interesting to see if these times of the year are still chosen in the United States in years to come. Dett's marriage is proof that he has intertwined both his native customs and those that he is learning in the United States.

Boonsong Areepanthu has been in the United States since 1976. He has his doctorate in Education, and works part time as a translator for the Warren County Health Center. Since his arrival in the United States he has attended several Laotian funerals. One afternoon he sat down and told me about Laotian practices running the gamut from births, weddings, death and

funerals.

In rural Laos it is customary for the sick to die at home. After the death the family prepares the body for cremation, if the death was not accidental. In the case of an accidental death the body is to be buried instead of being cremated, because it is believed that the spirit is not ready to leave the earth. The corpse is kept at home usually from one to seven days. During this time the family entertains relatives and friends. The majority of the cost of the entertainment, consisting of food and drink and sometimes music, is usually the obligation of the host, but friends sometimes contribute. The host may house the guests, but they usually tend to stay elsewhere. The guests are obliged to be jolly and happy in order to cheer up the host family. Sometimes games are played. Every family would like a monk to preside over the ceremony, but this depends upon the financial status of the family; monks tend to charge for their services. Although, monks are not supposed to handle money, they usually have assistants to do this. The monks chant, and the tone of the ritual tends to pacify the family. Later, the body is taken to the cemetery to be cremated. After the body is cremated, it is believed that the soul will rise with the smoke to heaven.

Another custom practiced both here and in Laos is the ritual of "memory" services. If someone dreams about the dead, the host family will prepare a meal and offer it to the dead. All friends are to gather in one room. After the joysticks, long candles on

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sticks, have been lit, the guests and family are to bow down toward the urn in which the ashes are kept. During this time they invite the dead person to come and eat. After about thirty minutes they, in turn, finish the meal. Some people believe that good spirits will come and provide advice about problems to them and the dead.

While I spoke with Boonsong one afternoon, he recalled a story about a man who recently died in Bowling Green. This man died a sudden death by accident. Because of this, he was not traditionally cremated, but rather buried. The wife, fearing that the dead man's spirit would haunt her, summoned a monk to perform a ritual. The monk performed the ritual by taking a long piece of rope and encircling the yard and the house while chanting. This was to keep the husband's bad spirit out. Boonsong stated that although both the wife and the husband were baptised Christian since their arrival here in Bowling Green, the wife still felt that the ritual was necessary for her family's safety. Days later, the wife said that she could hear the husband speak to her in her dreams. Boonsong does not know whether the dead man's spirit finally left the area. Although the above story is a mix of traditional religion and folk belief, many of the newly arrived immigrants have intertwined both Buddhist and Christian beliefs.

The son of the man who died was also obligated to perform in the ritual. He too is Christian. It is customary for the son to become ordained as an assistant to a monk. During the service

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the boy is to shave his head and wear a yellow robe. He also carries a yellow rope which is believed to lead the dead man to heaven.

Boonsong thinks that this merging and picking and choosing of customs will continue:

Just like when you are sick and you take one kind of medicine, you say; "Well that might not be good enough." And you take another kind of medicine, maybe one of them will help. They think if Jesus doesn't help, maybe Buddha will help. If Buddha doesn't help, maybe the spirit, any kind of spirit, in this world will help.

As the Southeast Asians come into contact with new customs it is assured that they will pick up what is needed and pass by what will not fit into their day-to-day lives.

That afternoon, Boonsong brought up the customs of the arrival of a newborn into the family. During the first seven days of the newborn's life, a ceremony may be held in which the baby's hair is shaved and the baby is welcomed into the family. Sometimes a little strand of hair is left on the top of the baby's head. If it can be afforded, monks will be invited, and a small party with food and drink will take place. In Laos, and frequently in the United States, white string is tied to the baby's wrist. This act ensures that the bad spirit will leave the baby, and that the baby will remain happy and healthy. If possible a monk will perform the act. The white string can also be used to tie to your house, or even your car. The white string wards away all bad spirits.

In Laos, birthdays are only celebrated for the Buddha and the elite. But as the immigrants stay longer in the United

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States more and more are beginning to celebrate birthdays. This is especially popular among the younger children. Boonsong also mentioned that Christmas is being celebrated more often by the immigrants. The day I was at Pane's home he added that he had just celebrated his first Christmas. At the same time he pointed to the attic and said that he has a tree, an artificial one. That artificial tree will probably be used for many more Christmases in Pane's home. Boonsong also commented that now some immigrants are celebrating Thanksgiving.

Monks play an important role in all of Laotian ceremonies. The monk may be consulted for anything ranging from appropriate times for wedding ceremonies to winning the lottery. Although most of the Southeast Asians have adopted Christianity since their arrival in the United States, Boonsong believes that Buddhism and the monks will still play an important role in the lives of the immigrants. In nearby Nashville and Murfreesboro, Buddhist temples serve the community. It would be interesting to see if customs and traditions would be more prevalent if Bowling Green gained a temple. Boonsong believes that Buddhism will always provide a sense of identification for the immigrant, but as they assimilate more fully into American culture they will begin to accept Christianity.

After my interviews, I thought that it will be up to the parents of the children to carry out the traditions and stories which the parents have lived with. They will have to remind the children of their ethnic heritage as they become Americans.

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Today, the Asians in Bowling Green are simply seen as a group of immigrants. Maybe in twenty years they will be seen as a viable ethnic group among many that make up south central Kentucky. Thinking about Pane's Christmas tree in the attic and his daughters watching cartoons makes me realize how far they have come and how much they have obtained in three years. Their Buddhist calender looming above the entertainment console in the living room attests to the fact that all immigrants give and receive customs which perpetuates the varied and viable culture of American today, and that in the future.

Oral Sources

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Pane Sananikone. Tape-recorded interview, 14 April 1989, 1009 Raven Street Bowling Green, Kentucky.