

RELIGIOUS EXPERIENCES
OF THE SOUTHEAST ASIANS
IN BOWLING GREEN

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Diversity is the word that would best describe the religious practices of the Southeast Asians who have come to Bowling Green. Of the five interviews for this portion of the project, the eight people involved gave varied accounts of religious life in their home countries as well as differing impressions of religion in the United States.

Their recollections of Buddhism, the major religion in each of the countries from which they came, contrast greatly. They give what appear to be conflicting descriptions of religious education, worship, the meaning of Buddhist teachings, and the lifestyle of the monks. The seeming conflicts are not as glaring when you consider that the differences vary with urban and rural life, as well as with the degree of involvement on the part of the interviewees.

Boonsong Areephanthu is from Thailand. His father was Muslim and his mother was Buddhist. He was raised as a Muslim, but his knowledge of Buddhism seems more precise than that of the others. His depiction of the life of Buddha as a prince, raised in isolation in the palace until he slipped out as a young adult, gives a basis for the major precepts of the faith. When he discovered the needs of the common person, he left the palace and went away for a time

of meditation to find a solution for the sufferings of those of the lower castes. Based on the precept that "life is suffering,"¹ he wrote spiritual objectives that would help to alleviate the suffering of the people around him and offer them hope. Buddhism calls for a simplification of life.

The simplification of life is seen in the ritual and lifestyle of the monk. He shaves his head, puts on the simple robe, and wears sandals. "And we don't wear underwear. You not supposed to wear underwear," was the comment of Bruce Sengkhamyong, when referring to his experience as a temporary monk for the funeral of his "great, great mother."

Areephanthu remarked that Buddhism is not a religion like Christianity, Islam, or Judaism. He referred to it as "a good philosophy of life."

The perceptions of the worship in Buddhism also varied from one interviewee to another. One of them stated that the image of Buddha was just a symbol and they did not worship Buddha.² Tuyen Anh Johnson, from Vietnam, described how she would go to the temple on the mountain when she had a problem and ask Buddha for help. She noted that when she returned home, everything would be alright. The Haks commented that when someone went to the temple, they would light incense or a candle before the Buddha. If they had a wish, they believed that the incense or smoke from the candle would lift the prayer to God. Mrs. Hak said that

she believes the God of Buddha is the same as the God of Christians. This idea was also expressed by Mrs. Johnson. Areephanthu pointed out that before his death, Buddha said that a person would come to tell about God. Some Buddhists say that this person was Christ.

The one thing that all of the interviewees seemed to agree on was that with few exceptions, the monks did the worshipping and the congregation observed. It is a ceremonial service with a lot of chanting by the monks. Occasionally those observing will chant a reply.³

Worship by the individual seemingly took precedence over congregational worship. Some of the temples were open for worship at all times. Others were restricted, or at least had restricted areas that were used only by the monks. At these temples, the monks would go into the area where the Buddha was and pray or burn incense on behalf of the people.⁴

Ponnaren Hak related that the worship of an individual might be specific, like a prayer for a particular need. If a person were going to make a long journey, he would go to the temple and burn incense before the Buddha to ask for a safe journey. Often the prayer had to do with a wish for the next life. If a person were not good looking, she might take flowers and leave them before Buddha and ask that she might be as beautiful as the flowers in her next life. An expectant mother might place flowers there to ask that her child would be beautiful. If a person wanted

wealth in the next life, he would take an offering of money. The gift or the object placed before the statue would correspond to what he wanted in the present or in the future life.

None of those interviewed mentioned prayers or offerings for forgiveness. They tried to live their lives to be as good as they could so that they would improve their standing in the next life. The rigid caste system out of which Buddhism came would not allow for improvement of social position in the present life, so their emphasis was on a higher position in the life to come.

The most evident sign of repentance or penitence was in the activities of the elderly or retired people. Many of them would adopt a lifestyle similar to that of the monks. They would wear simple clothing, often the yellow robe, and spend a great deal of time at the temple. They would also abstain from meat and follow the practice of the monks in fasting from noon until the following morning. Ponnaren Hak described this as a process of cleaning out their sins. It was a preparation for death so that their next life would be better. The better a person was, the better their chance of advancing to a higher caste in the next life.

It should be noted that failure to live a good life could result in coming back in a lower caste, or at least to a worse situation. Sengkhamyong expressed the belief that if you killed an animal for purposes other than for

food, you would come back as that animal; the animal would come back as a human and would kill you. He also said that a person might start as another type of animal, like a chicken or a frog before becoming a human. This belief did not seem to be prevalent among the other informers. There was the opinion, expressed by Ponnaren Hak, that if a person were unkind to animals or to other people that the punishment was to be lowered in status in the next life and that it might be possible to return as an animal. She also stated that if you were unkind to someone who was handicapped or disfigured in some way that if you had children, they might suffer from the same affliction.

This would account for the practice of the monks not killing animals. Mrs. Johnson expressed her belief that if you step on an ant by mistake, it is not a sin, but if you kill one on purpose, it is a sin.

The ultimate goal of the Buddhist is to achieve Nirvana, or "enlightenment".⁵ When a person has advanced as far as he can in human terms, he reaches this equivalent of heaven. Little was said by the interviewees about punishment other than coming back to a lower position. Ponnaren Hak mentioned hell in her description of punishment for "the worst sin a person could commit." This sin, according to her, was the unfaithfulness of a woman to her husband. The punishment for this sin is to be put in boiling water in hell for two thousand years. There is no punishment for a man being unfaithful to his wife. She

used a metaphor to explain this. The husband is the ocean, the wife is the water. No matter how much water comes into the ocean, the ocean is still not full. So no matter how many girls a guy has played with, that is still not enough. A girl can not do that.

Another metaphor is that the man is like gold, that if covered by mud, can be washed off and is clean. The girl is made of a material that, if she falls in the mud, no matter how much she is washed, she can not remove the mud or the smell. Her reputation is tarnished forever.

The interviewees also presented a varied picture as to religious education. Areephanthu said that Buddhism was a required subject in the schools of Thailand. A person had the right to choose their own religion, but the king had to be Buddhist. All public schools in Thailand teach Buddhist philosophy. He mentioned that even though he was Muslim, he was taught Buddhist beliefs in school. The Haks and Sengkhamyong said that in their countries (Cambodia and Laos) the home was the location of religious teachings. The monks studied at the temple school and on some occasions religion was taught to others there, but for the most part, a person was taught about Buddha by an older relative. Some of the monks would teach other subjects. In Laos, the monks would sometimes teach French or English at the temple.

There is also some discrepancy as to the emphasis placed on a person becoming a monk. Areephanthu said that

it was expected of all males to serve as a temple monk for a period of at least several weeks or months during their lifetimes. Mrs. Johnson stated that a person was not expected to serve as a monk unless they wanted to do so. Sengkhamyong mentioned only that he had served as a temporary monk for the funeral in the home. This was to provide more yellow robes which they thought increased a person's chance of making it to heaven. The Haks mentioned that the best way a son could repay his parents for all they had done for him was to become a monk. His service as a monk would bring more blessing to them and help to insure them of an elevated position in the life to follow. Girls, on the other hand, would repay their parents by accepting the husband chosen for them and by being the best wife and mother she could be.⁶ The continuation of the family through grandchildren would give more people to reverence them in the future and thereby increase their chance for Nirvana.

The majority of the active participants in the practice of Buddhism are the elderly. Part of this, as has been mentioned, is the emphasis on preparing for death and for the life to come. Another reason for this is found in the work ethic of the people. The Buddhist worship days are based on the lunar calendar. They worship on the full moon, the new moon, and the days half way between them. This causes the day of worship to change every two weeks instead of remaining on the same day of the week all the

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time. The work week is scheduled the same as that in the major industrial nations, with weekends off. The majority of the people work on the days of worship and cannot attend services on those days.⁷ As a result, only the retired people or housewives and children can attend. Most of the children are in school, so this eliminates many of them also.

The special celebrations, such as New Years and other special days are attended by many of the people because schools are closed and many of the companies are closed in observance of the holidays. Many of the temples appear to have adopted a revised scheduling of services with the emphasis on individual worship rather than on group worship.

Although religion does not seem to be important in many ways to those who came to Bowling Green from Southeast Asia, in other ways it is very significant. The practice of their religion was not observable as much by their attendance at the temple as it was by practices in the home. The rituals were, and still are, important to them. At the birth of a child, the monk would come to bring the blessing on the child's life. When the child was several weeks old, friends and family members come to bring their gifts. The bestowing of the gift is also an indication of the blessings and good wishes offered to the parents and the new child.⁸

At the wedding the monks come to offer their blessings upon the union of the couple. The ceremony is filled with ritual. As the priest gives his blessing by chanting the

ceremony, the guests pass lighted candles around a circle surrounding the kneeling couple. As each holds the candle, they wave their hand over it towards the couple to cause the smoke to go towards them and then upward. At the conclusion of the ceremony, the priest ties a thread to the wrist of each one being married. The the parents of the bride and groom, followed by each guest, also tie threads on the couples' wrists. These threads also symbolize the blessings of the people to the marriage of the two. These are worn for several days following the wedding, which can take up to three days in Cambodia. The wedding is usually limited to one day here and is often followed by a Christian wedding if the couple has joined another church.⁹

The ritualistic chanting at a funeral in the homes is considered of great importance. According to Sengkhamyong, the more monks present, including those family members who serve as temporary monks, the better chance the person has of reaching enlightenment. When it comes time for the body to be burned, each person present will throw a piece of wood on the funeral pyre. This is significant because it is believed that the fire and smoke help to lift the spirit of the person upward to a higher life or to Nirvana. The burning of the body is needed to lift the spirit. Often, after the cremation, the urn containing the ashes is placed in the temple or the ashes are scattered in the temple area.¹⁰

The ritualistic part of the religious practices appears to be the part that has remained with the Southeast Asians

since coming to the United States. Then [?] person interviewed [?] all consider themselves to be Christians, but the importance of the blessings offered through the ritual still appear to be very important to most of them. Kaony[?]Hak's oldest daughter had both a Buddhist wedding and a Christian wedding. All of the rituals described above were carried out in her Cambodian ceremony. In talking about the wedding, her sister pointed out the rituals and repeatedly said, "That's for a blessing." She even apologized for using the term so many times.

Yong Chau said that if she marries a Cambodian, she will probably have both ceremonies, but if she marries a Chinese, she will probably only have a Christian wedding as her sister did.

As noted before, many of the Southeast Asians see little, if any, difference between the God worshipped in Buddhism and the one worshipped in Christianity. This has probably made it easier for them to make the change from Buddhism to Christianity. Many of the ones interviewed concerning their conversion to Christianity indicated that the change took place in the refugee camps in Thailand or shortly after arriving in the United States. The conversion of Sengkhamyong came about through the influence of his brother-in-law, who was a Christian preparing for the ministry. Tuyen Anh Johnson was converted through the influence of her American husband. Areephanthu was converted while a Thai embassy employee in Egypt. His wife was a member of the Eastern Orthodox

Church, and this influenced his decision.

In choosing churches here in Bowling Green, there seem to be two factors of great importance in the selection process. Some of the newcomers have chosen the church of their sponsor. Others have selected a church on the basis of the special efforts of the particular church to provide a ministry for them in their native language. The Hillview Heights Baptist Church has a special ministry for Laotians. There are some other Internationals who attend these services, but the language used is Thai (the language of the minister) and the Laotians can understand a great deal of what is said because of the similarities in the languages. Some of the service is in English which the other participants can understand reasonably well. Two Iranians attend these services regularly. Areephanthu explains things they do not understand in Arabic."

The scheduling of the Laotian services corresponds with the regular services of the church. Sengkhamyong attends the college class of the Sunday School and then the Laotian church service. The format of the church service is much like that of the English language service in the church, but does allow for more participation on the part of those who attend. Members of the group will often give a testimony or teach the others a new song they have learned. Occasionally the group attends the English language service. When they do, one of them usually reads the Scripture in the service. Areephanthu translates the message of the pastor into Thai

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for the Laotians. This group is very active in their attempts to enlist other Internationals into their group. One of the big drawing cards, according to Areephanthu, is that it gives the people a chance to practice their English among those they feel will not laugh at them. It becomes a class in English as well as in Bible.

The largest group of Cambodian Christians is probably the group that meets at First Baptist Church. They also have both Sunday School and Church in the language of those attending.¹² There is also a group that meets for Sunday School at the Presbyterian Church. Hoat Lim, a Cambodian, teaches the lesson in Khmer, the language of Cambodia. Those attending there worship with the English-speaking congregation for church.¹³

Because of the Catholic background of many in Vietnam, most of the Vietnamese in Bowling Green attend one of the Catholic churches.¹⁴

It has been mentioned before that in the Southeast Asian countries, the elderly people are the ones most likely to be involved in the activities of their religion. As they have come to the United States, the older people tend to stay away from church. Part of this may be because of adherence to their original faith, but more likely it is because of the uncertainties with which they face the new society. The young people adjust more quickly. They learn the language more easily. They adopt the new culture quicker. And they are more involved in the activities of the new religious groups.

Several of those interviewed mentioned that there were more young people in the group where they worshipped than there were older people.

There was still, however, the sense of loyalty to family and long-held family practices, even with the younger generation taking the lead in religion in the United States. Sengkhamyong and Ponnaren Hak both made statements in reference to their beliefs that showed this. Sengkhamyong mentioned that his grandmother had explained why Christianity made more sense, and added that she was right, it did make more sense. Ponnaren Hak described the beliefs of her mother and then added, "I believe that way, too." The first generation of American-born Southeast Asians will depend less on the beliefs of parents and grandparents and become more fully involved in the regular activities of their respective churches. Sengkhamyong already attends the English-speaking Sunday School class with those of his own age group, although he is the only International student in that group. Ponnaren Hak attends the English language worship service at First Baptist Church. Her Cambodian friends are hesitant to do so because they still feel that everyone will stare at them.

Selection of churches in the case of most Southeast Asians seems to be a voluntary thing. None of those interviewed said that they felt any pressure from their sponsors to attend a particular church either because their sponsor attended there or suggested that they attend.

Some of them selected the church of their sponsor, but did so without feeling any duress.

Becoming Christians for the refugees is another part of becoming American. The desire of these people to become American affects their decisions in many areas, including their choice of religious affiliation and activities. This is apparent in several ways. First is the fact that many of them made their change in religious faith within the first few weeks or months after leaving their homes. It is as if they wanted to rid themselves of connections with what they were leaving behind. The bad experiences of being separated from family, the terror of war, the fear of communism, along with other things needed to be dealt with, and a new faith in God offered the hope they so desperately sought. In America, the new religious groups gave them a sense of belonging, while still providing the security of a common language and national cohesiveness. By holding to the belief that the God of Buddha is also the God of Christianity, they can cling to the old for refuge and yet reach out to the new in hope.

NOTES

1. Areephanthu, Dr. Boonsong, taped interview
2. Areephanthu, Dr. Boonsong, taped interview
3. Areephanthu, Dr. Boonsong, taped interview
4. Hak, Ponnaren, taped interview
5. Areephanthu, Dr. Boonsong, taped interview
6. Hak, Ponnaren and Kaony, taped interview
7. This information was gleaned from interviews with
Kaony and Ponnaren Hak, Dr. Boonsong Areephanthu,
and Bruce Sengkhamyong.
8. Hak, Ponnaren, taped interview
9. Hak, Ponnaren, Oral interview noted in field diary.
10. Hak, Kaony and Ponnaren, taped interview
11. The information concerning the Laotian services
came from Bruce Sengkhamyong and Dr. Areephanthu.
12. Hak, Ponnaren, taped interview
13. Deputy, Marty, Oral telephone interview noted in diary
14. Deputy, Marty, Oral telephone interview noted in diary

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Areephanthu, Dr. Boonsong, taped interview recorded at Warren Central High School on March 30, 1989.

Deputy, Marty, telephone interview with notes recorded in field diary on April 17, 1989.

Hak, Ponnaren and Kaony, taped interview recorded in their home at 1044 Garvin Lane on April 5, 1989.

Johnson, Tuyen Anh, taped interview recorded in her home at 125 Mark Trail on April 1, 1989.

Loy, Teng and Yong Chay and Loeng Chau, taped interview recorded in their home at #7, Regency Park Apartments on March 20, 1989.

Sengkhamyong, Bruce Phimphone, taped interview recorded at the Fine Arts Building, Western Kentucky University on March 27, 1989.

There was also a session with Ponnaren and Kaony Hak before the recorded interview in which a video tape of a Cambodian wedding was viewed and explained. Notes from this hour session are in the field diary.