

SOUTHEAST ASIAN CULTURAL HISTORY PROJECT

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INTRODUCTION

Our project has revolved around Cambodian and Lao elderly who have assisted us in documenting their traditions and cultures. Originally, the project was to incorporate the cultures of the Hmong (Highland Lao) and Vietnamese, but because of the loss of interpreters, we have had to restrict this project to information about the Cambodian (known as Khmer) and Laotian.

The information in this project is to be utilized for agencies who require information about the traditions of the Cambodian and Lao cultures. The prime reason for this project is to preserve their heritages, in book form, for future generations to explore their roots. We feel that preserving one's traditions and history contribute not only to recognizing one's culture, but also to the continued development of a people - both spiritually and economically. It is apparent that children who are raised with a strong familial base, and are taught to expand upon the progress that previous generations have passed down to them, have more direction and stamina than children who are unfamiliar with their ancestry. Further, in Southeast Asia, ancestors are given the highest respect, with memorials usually in every home. Their past is extremely important, and is the base for their religious and moral teachings. The loss of their past is the loss of their culture, and with that, their strong sense of survival through education and hard work.

Funding was requested for this project at various workshops at Brown University, St. Joseph's Hospital, OIC, and University of RI. At these workshops, problems of resettlement and isolation of the elderly were discussed, but there were no funds available for this handbook. We had contacted Rhode Island College for funding, but were refused, because the funds were appropriated to another agency. The Department of Elderly Affairs appropriated funding for a Meals - on - Wheels program at the Laotian Buddhist Temple in Providence, RI. The program began in December, 1988 until it was discontinued in September, 1989 because of lack of transportation for the elderly. The meals were offered bi-weekly, and served 25 -30 elderly Laotian, Hmong, Cambodian, and Vietnamese per day. It was during this time that many of the interviews for this handbook were done. Among the people interviewed were a Lao Buddhist Monk, who gave us most of the information on religion. Recently, the Department of Elderly Affairs has contacted Sirinath about resuming the meals on wheels program, and possible funding for this handbook was discussed. A meeting is being scheduled for March, 1990. In March of 1989, the Governor's Advisory Council of Southeast Asian Refugees recommended to the State of R.I. to set aside a \$60,000 grant for SEDC (Socio Economic Development Center for Southeast Asians). Chhem Sip, Executive Director of SEDC, has reserved \$20,000 for elderly projects. It is planned that by the summer of 1990, these moneys would be appropriated, and we are planning to submit

a proposal for the handbook. We will meet with Mr. Sip and the board of directors of SEDC, to discuss how to go about accomplishing this goal.

As we were unable to secure funding for this project, this material will be copied and stored for future grants that would allow us to print enough handbooks to sell to ethnic markets and agencies. In the event that we can secure funding, this handbook would be expanded and more detailed in each subject discussed. We have contacted a printer, who has agreed to print the document at reduced rates. Any proceeds would be allocated to the SEDC (Socio Economic Development Center) for Southeast Asians, with the agreement that it would be utilized for future elderly projects.

The elderly who assisted us in gathering the information did not want any financial reward for their help, only copies to give to their families, as they understand the significance of preserving their cultures.

HISTORY AND BACKGROUND OF SOUTHEAST ASIA

Because of limited space, we will begin the historical background when the French first proclaimed the Indochinese Union in 1893, which ended around 1950, when separate treaties were ratified recognizing Vietnam (under ex-Emperor Bao Dai), Cambodia and Laos as independent self governing states within the French Union. After the Geneva Conference in 1954, France lost total control over these three nations and the name "Indochina" no longer had any political or constitutional meaning. After the French lost control of the region, the United States began their involvement with what is now termed the "Vietnam War", which deeply affected the peoples and politics of the area.

Geographically, Cambodia, Laos and Vietnam reflects the portion of mainland Southeast Asia, previously known as "French Indochina." It is important to note that it was only between the years of 1893 and 1954 that these countries were not independent. Each country differs from each other historically, linguistically and, in many respects, culturally. We will point out their shared values and customs, and the specific cultures of the Khmer and Laotian in the following portions of this document.

Southeast Asia has historically been a cross-roads of cultural activity. For more than two thousand years, Chinese, Indian and Oceanic peoples have influenced the languages, customs and institutions of the area. To these have been added European Christian influences during the past 500 years, resulting in a great diversity of lifestyles of the present peoples of Southeast Asia. For example, there are over 16 major languages within Cambodia, Laos and Vietnam. Although there is no single cultural type of Southeast Asia, many of the social customs and values have some common aspects.

The "typical" family unit in Southeast Asia is larger than in the United States. In their traditional culture, the basic family unit is an extended one that includes not only parents and their children, but grandparents, married children, aunts and uncles, and other relatives as well. They may all live together in a single household or in close proximity, although this changed during times of war.

In the Southeast Asian family a great deal of respect is paid by children and youth to parents and the elderly. The father is accepted as the head of the household in the immediate family even if he is not the sole wage earner (especially among the labor class and in rural areas). As the head of the household, he is charged with upholding the family traditions and setting moral standards for the children. The mother is often responsible for maintaining the household budget and promoting family unity. When the

parents are not present, the oldest child must take over the responsibilities as the family head. It is not unusual for older brothers and sisters to take care of their siblings. The younger children obey and respect their older siblings as much as they do their parents.

Because of the loss and separation of family members due to war and resettlement in the U.S., many refugee families lost their closeness as they adapted to life in America, particularly when children take on American customs and practices more quickly than their parents. It is for this reason that this document was compiled - to help preserve the rich traditions and cultures of Southeast Asia.

The following item is included in the hard copy of this project. It is available in the Shapiro Library, Southern New Hampshire University.

Hammond Incorporated. (1968). *Vietnam and neighboring countries in 1968*. Maplewood, N.J.: Hammond.

RELIGION

There is a great diversity of religions among and within the Southeast Asian population. Buddhism is the most predominant religion in the area, and therefore this is where our discussion on religion will concentrate.

A common theme of Eastern religions is the search for peace and harmony. Southeast Asians seek freedom from conflict and uncertainty through their religions, whether seeking contentment in this life or through reincarnation in the next.

Great respect is given to ancestors. People from Southeast Asia often commemorate the anniversary of an ancestor's death rather than the birth, and some place great importance on visiting and caring for the tombs or memorials of their deceased relatives. Many of the refugees from Southeast Asia find their separation from their homeland even more painful by their inability to visit the graves of their ancestors. Funeral practices are very different from those in the U.S., and many of the old funeral traditions have been lost, such as the walking procession from the house of the deceased to the burial ground, and religious rituals at the burial ground, which have been cut out because of the American obsession with time.

Traditional medical practices of some Southeast Asian are tied closely to certain religious beliefs. Evil spirits or "evil winds" may require the presense of a Shaman, or folk doctor, who may prescribe herbal medicine or special kinds of massage to alleviate illness or disease. The last 3 generations of Southeast Asia have utilized the expertise of the folk doctors along with Western medical doctors and hospitals.

Because some refugees are sponsored by religious groups, there have been some instances in which some people have felt pressured to convert, as an expression of gratitude. It is important to stress to the sponsors and new arrivals to the U.S., that conversion to their sponsors religion because of gratitude or pressure is not acceptable, and they should enjoy the freedom to maintain their own religious practices and beliefs, and to instill them in their children.

MARRIAGE

Khmer and Lao, particularly those living in rural areas, maintain very traditional values regarding sexual behavior. These matters are not openly discussed, and parents refrain from specific sex education, particularly with daughters. At the time of marriage, the bride-to-be receives basic instruction regarding sex from her female relatives.

Due to the importance given to marriage, the parents usually arrange the match while the couple learns to accept each other. If the marriage is not arranged, it must be approved by both parents.

The wedding celebration is traditionally held in the bride's home, but the expense for the wedding is usually covered by the bridegroom's family. Traditionally, it was celebrated for three days, but because of war and security reasons, it was shortened to 1 day. In the U.S., the typical wedding is held for 2 days.

Men usually marry between 23 and 30 years of age, women between the ages of 16 and 22.

Divorce is legal but not common, and is usually discouraged. It is allowed only after reconciliatory efforts of the husband and wife have failed, and it is very rare to have the proceedings brought to court.

FOOD HABITS AND PREPARATION

In the Southeast Asian culture, the first question a person asks on meeting a friend or an acquaintance, especially around meal time, would not be "How are you?" but rather, "Have you eaten yet?" Food and related hospitality are an important aspect of the culture. It is also considered rude for a person to reply that he/she is hungry after being asked by the host/hostess, but rather the hostess would just bring out the food and utensils to the person, in order to offer whatever they have prepared. Many Americans have been caught offguard, and often pleasantly surprised, when they just "stop over" a Southeast Asian's home, either for business or personal reasons, and are presented with a meal, or a snack and a drink - and then they are sent home with an additional package of food! This gesture is a very natural part of family life in a Southeast Asian's home, and usually extra food is prepared for just that purpose.

Khmer and Lao techniques of preparation of food are based on hand methods, like chopping an assemblage of fresh seasonings very fine with a cleaver, or pounding them to a paste with a heavy mortar and pestal. Food processors and blenders are Western substitutes which may be used, but they do not wholly duplicate the consistency of chopped or pounded mixtures, and may alter the final taste and texture somewhat.

The seasonings that are virtually unique of Southeast Asian cooking are galingale, lemongrass, and fish sauce. Galingale is a rhizome used in Lao and Khmer kitchens much like fresh ginger. Fresh ginger and coriander (also called Chinese parsley or cilantro) and fresh red or green chili peppers are used extensively in Lao and Cambodian cooking. Ginger, galingale and chili peppers can also be used dried. Lemons are not widely known in Southeast Asia, the favorite souring agents are limes and lemongrass, often used together.

The preferred variety of rice in Laos, which is used both as a thickener and as a substitute for long grain rice, is the short grain glutinous rice, which is known as sticky rice. The Khmer use sticky rice only as a dessert and thickener. Coconut milk is used in many of the dishes, such as curry, which is especially tasty because of the Indian and Chinese influences.

Khmer and Lao dishes are served with gracious simplicity. The dishes (there are usually 3-5 different entrees) are served "family style" at the same time, which includes a soup, together with greens and various dips (which usually include at least one spicy hot dip), and people help themselves. Various rules, which include "eldest first" or the head of the family, then the guests, followed by family, are observed at the dinner table.

The following are four dishes (2 Lao and 2 Khmer) which were given to us by Jang Dethoudom, a Laotian woman, and Marin Sor, a Cambodian: both are elderly, and have been cooking good food for many years. Please keep in mind that Southeast Asian food have no specific recipes, the food is spiced by taste, region, and family secrets. For convenience, we have included measurements, but keep in mind that these are close approximates, and, before serving, they should be tasted.

The ingredients used in these recipes can be found in Southeast Asian grocery stores. Many of the spices are not available in Chinese markets.

SOUR FISH SOUP
(KENG SOM PA)
RECIPE BY: JENG DETHOUDOM

Makes 4 servings

3 cups Water

1/2 teaspoon salt

2 stalks fresh lemongrass - chopped fine

1 large tomatoe - cut in 1" pieces

1/2 lb. freshwater fish, (pike, perch or trout)- scaled, cut in 1" pieces

2 T. fish sauce

3 onion

2 T. cilantro - finely chopped fresh leaves

Fresh lime

Combine water and salt in a large pot. Bring to a boil. Rest the lemongrass on work surface and pound once or twice in order to allow the lemongrass to absorb the moisture and release its flavor, and add to the pot. Stir in tomatoe pieces. Add fish and fish sauce. Cover, and cook about 10 minutes. Lower heat to medium, and add onion, cilantro, and cook for 5 more minutes. Squeeze fresh lime over each dish.

STEAMED RICE AND BANANA PUDDING

(KHAO TOM MAK KHUAY)

RECIPE BY: JENG DETHOUDOM

Makes 10 servings

1 cup glutinous rice (sticky rice)

1 cup coconut milk

1 cup water

1/2 cup sugar

1/4 t. salt

**3 firm bananas - cut in 1/2 length lengthwise - then in 1/2 crosswise
(wait until rice mixture is cooled)**

1 packages banana leaves - rinsed and cut into 10" squares

Soak rice in 3 cups cold water - cover about 2 hours. Drain rice in sieve and rinse in running water. Place rice in pot and mix with coconut milk, water, sugar and salt. Cook over very low heat, stirring frequently until rice is 1/2 cooked (about 20 minutes) - rice should be thick and creamy texture. Remove from heat and cool. Divide rice mixture into each banana square, and flatten in 3" square. Place 1 section of banana in each square. Fold 2 sides over and the fold over the opposite 2 sides to form a packet. Steam each packet in a large steamer about 25 minutes, until you can feel that the rice is mushy.

Serve warm or at room temperature.

CHICKEN CURRY
(KARY MON)
RECIPE BY: MARIN SOR

Makes 6-8 servings

3 lbs. chicken - cut up into 12 pieces (with bone in)

2-3 fresh garlic cloves - grated

1 stalk lemon grass

2 carrots - peeled and cut into 1/4's

2-3 potatoes - peeled and cut into 1/8's

2-4 tsp. curry powder

1 large onion - cut into small pieces

1/2-3/4 can coconut milk

Fry chicken and garlic in butter. Add lemon grass (pound twice to allow lemon grass to absorb moisture and release it's flavor) and cut in 1/3rd. Add potatoes and carrots. Fry for about 1/2 hr. until the chicken is slightly cooked. Mix in curry.

Cover chicken and vegetables with water. Cook at medium high heat - stirring occasionally. After about 15 minutes, add onion. Add coconut milk about 10 minutes before chicken and vegetables are done.

Serve hot with heated french bread.

CAMBODIAN SALAD WITH BEEF

(LOK LAK)

RECIPE BY: MARIN SOR

Makes 4 servings

1 head curly lettuce - separate into leaves

4 pickling cucumbers - sliced thin

3 tomatoes - sliced thin

1 large purple onion - sliced very thin

1 1/2 Lbs. Top Round - sliced about 1/8" thick and cut into 2" strips

1 T. oil

3 cloves garlic - crushed

4 T. soy sauce

1 tsp. sugar

1 tsp. vinegar

1/2 tsp. black pepper

1 tsp. flour - mixed with 1/4 cup water

Prepare vegetables and layer on large platter - lettuce on bottom, etc.

Heat garlic in oil. Fry beef quickly in hot oil and garlic. Cook remaining ingredients separately, and when thickened - add to beef. Stir quickly and put the beef mixture on middle top of vegetable platter.

Serve hot.