Southeast Asian refugees, primarily of Vietnamese, Cambodian, and Laotian national origin, are the largest and most visible refugee group to have settled in the United States since the mid-1970s. The story of Southeast Asians in America is one of very sudden and rapid growth, from a population of insignificant size in the early 1970s, to one of over a million people in the 1990s. The 1990 U.S. Census counted 615,000 Vietnamese, 128,000 Cambodians, 196,000 Laotians (almost half were Hmong), and some 200,000 ethnic Chinese from Southeast Asia. Even these figures probably understated the true size of these three national-origin groups because fertility levels are high and because continuing secondary migration within the United States has made it difficult to keep accurate records.\(^1\)

Southeast Asian refugees have traveled a great cultural distance. They have come to postindustrial America from largely subsistence economies. Many refugees left interlocking kinship ties in small villages for a mobile, urban/suburban civilization. The religious institutions and practices linked to their ways of life in Asia were substantially different from those of the contemporary United States. Laotians and Cambodians come from a society that is overwhelmingly Theravada Buddhist. The Vietnamese come from a society that is shaped by Mahayana Buddhism and Confucianism. Even Vietnamese Catholicism, the religion of a substantial minority of people in Vietnam, has been so heavily influenced by indigenous traditions that it is frequently referred to as a form of “Confucianized Christianity.”\(^2\) Southeast Asians in the United States now live in a postindustrial society with a majority Protestant population that has been heavily influenced by its own varieties of Christian traditions and beliefs.\(^3\) This chapter examines how Southeast Asian refugees are coping with these sudden and drastic cultural, social, and economic changes in the new land through the lens of their religious practices. We first provide a discussion of why and how Southeast Asian refugees have been resettled in America. We look at the challenges they
face and at how they are faring in the new land. We then examine in
greater detail the role of religion in facilitating the process of adjustment
and in reconstructing the moral orders and spiritual lives of Southeast
Asians in the United States.

The U.S. Involvement in Southeast
Asia and Refugee Flight

The sudden emergence of Southeast Asians on the American scene was
primarily the result of U.S. military involvement in Southeast Asia. The
United States originally had little economic interest in the region. The de-
velopment of the Communist bloc dominated by the former Soviet Union,
the Communist takeover in China, the direct confrontation with Commu-
nist troops in the Korean War, and the threat of the Communist “domino”
effect prompted a U.S. foreign policy to “contain” communism, pushing
Americans into Indo-China.

The Vietnam War

In 1954 the French army was defeated by Ho Chi Minh’s Viet Minh
Front forces, and Vietnam was divided into two countries: the Demo-
cratic Republic of Vietnam (North Vietnam), headed by Ho Chi Minh, and the
Republic of Vietnam (South Vietnam), headed by Ngo Dinh Diem. In re-
ponse, the United States—acting on the primary foreign policy objective
of containing international Communism—became increasingly dedicated
to the preservation of Diem’s anti-Communist government in South Viet-
nam. The U.S. government hoped that its support of South Vietnam
would deter the expansion of power of communist North Vietnam and
prevent communism from spreading to other Southeast Asian countries.
Meanwhile, many U.S.-based voluntary agencies, including Catholic Re-
lief Services (CARE), Church World Services, and others, were active in
South Vietnam in response to the social disruption of war. Thus, the peo-
ple of South Vietnam began to become better acquainted with Americans
and American culture and better connected with Catholicism than their
northern country folks.

In 1961, President Kennedy sent military advisers to South Vietnam to
assist the beleaguered Diem government. However, Diem, born of a
Catholic family and relying heavily upon Vietnamese Catholics and
Catholic refugees from the north for his suppression of communist in-
festation in the south, began to lose his popularity. In a country in which
Buddhism dominated, Diem’s favoritism toward Catholics created strong
resentment, which opened up opportunities for the North Vietnamese–supported insurgents. These insurgents organized them-
selves as the National Liberation Front, known as the Viet Cong (Viet-
namese guerrilla fighters who opposed the South Vietnamese govern-
ment). Diem also made enemies of other religious groups, such as the Hoa
Hao, the Cao Dai, and the Binh Xuyen, who opposed his Catholic fa-
voritism.4 In 1963, a military coup overthrew Diem. This coup apparently
took place with the knowledge and consent of the American Embassy. The
new leaders of South Vietnam proved less able to maintain control than
Diem. By 1965, with the South Vietnamese government on the verge of
collapse, President Johnson sent in ground troops to South Vietnam.
American military and political leaders believed that they would be able
to win the war by the end of 1967.

At the beginning of 1968, however, the Viet Cong forces of the south
and the Viet Minh troops of the north launched the Tet Offensive, which
undermined most Americans’ confidence of winning the war. By the early
1970s, American political leaders began to realize that a quick military vic-
dory in Vietnam was extremely unlikely, that the American public was di-
vided over the Vietnam War, and that continuing a war that was increas-
ingly unpopular would mean committing American soldiers to an
indefinite future. At the Paris peace talks in 1973, the United States agreed
on a timetable for withdrawing American soldiers fighting in Vietnam
and turning the war over to the South Vietnamese army with the support
of American funding and continued training.

It turned out that the South Vietnamese government was no better
prepared to defend itself than it had been in 1965. The U.S. Congress, re-

tant to continue any backing at all for the domestically divisive war,
cut off aid to South Vietnam, which seriously diminished the chances for
survival of the disorganized and unprepared South Vietnamese govern-
ment. In contrast, the North Vietnamese military, battle-hardened through
years of fighting against the Americans and aided by the Viet Cong, found
few obstacles in its way. In April 1975, Saigon, the capital of South Viet-

am, fell to North Vietnamese troops. Vietnam was unified under the
Hanoi government, and Saigon was later renamed Ho Chi Minh City.

The war produced over fifty-eight thousand American and about
three million Vietnamese casualties. It also left in its wake nightmares, de-
pression, antisocial behavior, and post-traumatic stress disorder that con-
tinue to affect Americans and Vietnamese Americans, as well as hundreds
of thousands of refugees.

The U.S. Military Involvement in Laos and Cambodia

As in Vietnam, U.S. involvement in Laos and Cambodia was aimed
primarily at the containment of Communism. Postcolonial Laos and
Cambodia initially attempted to implement policies of neutrality. In
Laos, Prince Souvanna Phouma succeeded in establishing a coalition
CHAPTER TWO: ZHOU, BANKSTON, KIM

government in 1957 after several years of patient effort to bring together pro-American rightists, nonaligned centrists, and the Pathet Lao communists. However, the United States was not enthusiastic about this new coalition government because of the inclusion of the Pathet Lao. The United States thus actively intervened in the 1958 national election campaign to boost votes for the leftists, the United States cut off aid to Souvanna’s government, which eventually led to Souvanna’s resignation and ended the Laotian neutralist coalition.

Soon after, a civil war broke out between the Communist Pathet Lao and the Laotian Royalists. The Pathet Lao made significant advances with the assistance of the North Vietnamese Viet Minh forces and the Russians. At this point, the United States stepped in to form a mercenary army composed of Hmong tribesmen to fight the Pathet Lao and the Viet Minh. American forces also attacked the communist guerrillas with heavy aerial bombing. The war left massive casualties among the Hmong, who had fought on the U.S. side and were the main force holding back the Pathet Lao and North Vietnamese until 1973.

When the Pathet Lao came to power in 1975, the United States cut off aid to Laotian allies, forcing most Hmong and former Laotian Royalists to flee by air and overland to Thailand for asylum.

During the turbulent wars in Vietnam and Laos in the mid-1950s and the 1960s, Cambodia basically maintained its neutrality under Prince Sihanouk’s charismatic leadership and was able to enjoy peace and prosperity in a society that was largely agricultural, traditional, Buddhist, and isolated. A 1970 coup d’état, led by Sihanouk’s prime minister, Lon Nol, changed this, and the country was rapidly drawn into the Vietnam War. Cambodian history in the early 1970s was marked by governmental corruption, a near collapse of the national economy, the incursion of Vietnamese troops in the north of the country, and U.S. secret bombings of North Vietnamese border sanctuaries inside Cambodia. Phnom Penh, the Cambodian capital, fell to the Khmer Rouge, in mid-April 1975, a few weeks before Saigon fell to Communist forces. Several thousand military officers, government officials, and members of the country’s elite managed to escape to Thailand. Most Cambodians, though, were swept up in the massive evacuation from the cities to the countryside that the Khmer Rouge undertook in order to create a new society. In the process, many died by execution, starvation, overwork, and illness. It has been estimated that about 1.5 million Cambodians, out of a population of 8 million, vanished in the “killing fields” during Khmer Rouge rule between 1975 and 1978.

In late 1978, the Vietnamese army invaded Cambodia and overthrew Pol Pot’s government, forcing the Khmer Rouge to retreat to the jungles in the west along the Thai border. The Vietnamese invasion triggered a large flow of refugees from Cambodia to Thailand, creating crowded refugee camps that brought international attention to Cambodian suffering. During the massive refugee outflow, several Cambodian nationalist groups, including the Khmer Rouge, fought fiercely against the Vietnamese. The ensuing Cambodian civil war lasted until the late 1980s and almost completely dismantled the national economy and the traditional way of life.

The Refugee Exodus

Southeast Asian refugees fled their countries in different waves. Although Saigon, Vientiane, and Phnom Penh fell to the Communists forces roughly at the same time, only the Vietnamese had the privilege of “parole” to enter the United States immediately after the war, which allowed approximately 130,000 Vietnamese to land on U.S. soil. In December 1975, only 3,500 Hmong were paroled into the United States, while the majority of Hmong resistance forces and Laotian Royalists sought refuge in Thailand. During that time, Cambodia, then renamed Kampuchea, restricted the movement of people, but some 20,000 Cambodians still managed to escape to Thailand during the Khmer Rouge period.

Another large refugee exodus, known as the second wave, occurred at the end of the 1970s when hundreds and thousands of refugees fled Vietnam by boat, creating the “boat people” crisis, and over land to China and Thailand. About a quarter of a million Vietnamese refugees went to China and some half a million were picked up floating in the open sea by the national guards of various countries. According to most reports, almost half the boat people perished at sea. The remaining half ended up in camps in Thailand, Indonesia, Malaysia, Singapore, the Philippines, and Hong Kong. Thousands of refugees also fled Laos and Kampuchea over land to seek refuge in crowded camps along the Thai border. Despite harsh repatriation efforts from the Thai government, about 600,000 Cambodians (15 percent of the country’s population) and some 100,000 Hmong and 200,000 lowland Laotians (10 percent of the country’s population) fled over land to Thailand. The refugee exodus continued throughout the 1980s. Although the new governments did not plunge the three countries into bloodbaths, as so many had once feared, continuing political and religious repression, economic hardship, incessant warfare, and contacts with the outside world led many Southeast Asians to escape in search of better lives.

In sum, the Vietnam War and its expansion and the repressive regimes that followed the war left millions of people living in poverty, starvation, and constant fear in these three countries and forced many
least populated by immigrants. However, sizable ethnic populations gradually converged in California. In the 1980 census, over a third of the Vietnamese reported living in California, and another 10 percent in Texas. By 1990, 46 percent of the Vietnamese had settled or resettled in the state of California alone, a 12-percentage-point increase. Texas had also acquired a large Vietnamese population, containing 11 percent of all Vietnamese in the United States. The 1980 census did not have a detailed breakdown of Laotians and Cambodians. However, by 1990, 46 percent of Cambodians in the United States lived in California, 10 percent in Massachusetts, and 8 percent in Washington, D.C. Similarly, almost 40 percent of Laotians and 52 percent of Hmong were concentrated in California. Outside California, the Hmong tended to concentrate in Wisconsin (18 percent) and Minnesota (18 percent).

Within states, the refugees tended to converge in a handful of metropolitan areas. For example, as of 1990, over three-quarters of California’s Vietnamese population lived in four metropolitan areas—Orange County, Los Angeles, San Diego, and San Jose. In Texas, 44 percent of the Vietnamese resided in Houston. In Maryland and Virginia, 76 percent of the Vietnamese lived in Washington, D.C. In Washington State, 71 percent of the Vietnamese lived in Seattle. In Louisiana, close to two-thirds of the Vietnamese lived in New Orleans. This kind of concentration at the metropolitan level is due to secondary internal migration and subsequent international migration through family sponsorship. Though we have limited information on the magnitude of internal migration among Southeast Asian refugees, we know that secondary migration has occurred within a short period of time and that the primary motives for moving have been the establishment of an ethnic community and better economic conditions. Thus, despite government policies aimed at dispersion, geographically centered ethnic communities have been formed, drawing in growing numbers of compatriots through word of mouth and through extensive kinship and family networks.

Refugees from Indo-China are distinct from contemporary immigrants from Asia in demographic and socioeconomic characteristics. With the exception of the first wave of evacuees from South Vietnam in 1975, most of the Southeast Asians were of rural origins, and the Hmong were primarily an illiterate tribal group. Many of them had minimal formal education, few marketable skills, little English-language proficiency, and scant knowledge of the ways of a highly industrialized society—attributes that would ease the passage into America. Southeast Asian refugees are also significantly different from other post–World War II refugees, such as those that fled Cuba and the former Soviet Union. Most of the Cuban and Soviet refugees did not have to endure lengthy hardships in refugee camps and were able to carry with them personal/financial assets of varying sorts.

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**Figure 2.1 Southeast Asian Refugees Admitted to the United States by Year, 1975–1998**


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Resettlement and Adjustment

**Patterns of Settlement and Socioeconomic Adaptation**

Unlike most other immigrants, Southeast Asian refugees were pushed out of their homelands under extreme circumstances. They were therefore forced to leave without adequate preparation, had little control over when and where they could resettle, and lacked longstanding ethnic communities in host countries to provide assistance. Since U.S. refugee policy aimed at residential dispersion, Vietnamese, lowland Laotians and Hmong, and Cambodians were spread all over the United States, even in those states
Table 2.1 Characteristics of the Vietnamese, Laotians, and Cambodians in the United States, 1990

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Vietnamese</th>
<th>Laotian</th>
<th>Hmong</th>
<th>Cambodian</th>
<th>All Asian</th>
<th>All U.S.</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>% Female</td>
<td>47.4</td>
<td>48.3</td>
<td>48.9</td>
<td>51.7</td>
<td>51.2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Median age</td>
<td>25.6</td>
<td>20.5</td>
<td>12.7</td>
<td>19.7</td>
<td>29.2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Fertility per woman 35–44</td>
<td>2.3</td>
<td>3.5</td>
<td>6.1</td>
<td>3.4</td>
<td>1.9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>% Under 15 years of age</td>
<td>26.5</td>
<td>38.1</td>
<td>55.3</td>
<td>40.9</td>
<td>23.7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>% Female-headed households</td>
<td>15.9</td>
<td>11.3</td>
<td>13.6</td>
<td>25.4</td>
<td>11.5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>% Foreign-born</td>
<td>79.9</td>
<td>79.4</td>
<td>65.2</td>
<td>79.1</td>
<td>65.6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>% Immigrated after 1980</td>
<td>49.3</td>
<td>63.1</td>
<td>49.5</td>
<td>69.6</td>
<td>37.8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>% Do not speak English very well</td>
<td>60.8</td>
<td>67.8</td>
<td>76.1</td>
<td>70.0</td>
<td>39.8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>% Linguistically isolated</td>
<td>42.1</td>
<td>51.5</td>
<td>59.8</td>
<td>54.7</td>
<td>25.1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>% Less than 5th-grade education</td>
<td>11.4</td>
<td>33.9</td>
<td>54.9</td>
<td>40.7</td>
<td>7.1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>% College graduate or higher education</td>
<td>17.4</td>
<td>5.4</td>
<td>4.9</td>
<td>5.7</td>
<td>38.2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>% In labor force</td>
<td>64.5</td>
<td>58.0</td>
<td>29.3</td>
<td>46.5</td>
<td>67.4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>% Executive-professional</td>
<td>17.6</td>
<td>5.0</td>
<td>12.8</td>
<td>9.8</td>
<td>31.2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>% Unemployed</td>
<td>8.4</td>
<td>9.3</td>
<td>17.9</td>
<td>10.3</td>
<td>5.2</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Median family income $30,550 $23,110 $14,327 $18,126 $41,583 $35,225
Per capita income $9,033 $5,597 $2,692 $5,121 $13,806 $14,420
% Below poverty 25.7 34.7 63.6 42.6 14.0 13.1
% Receive public assistance 24.5 35.4 67.1 51.1 9.8 7.5
% Own home 40.1 24.0 11.1 19.7 48.3 64.2

Total Population 593,213 147,375 94,439 149,047 6,876,39 248,709,873


Among the foreign born, over 60 percent arrived after 1980, indicating that the Hmong are among the newest of the new immigrants. Except for the Cambodians, female-headed households were less common among refugees than in the U.S. population in general.

The initial group of refugees from Vietnam, and a small proportion of those from Laos and Cambodia arriving in the mid-1970s, came from privileged segments of their societies. These people include those most threatened by the new communist governments. Among them were generals, police officers, military officers, government ministers and civil servants, teachers, businessmen, employees of American agencies and corporations, and members of the elite classes. But these higher-status refugees were very diverse, ranging from fervent anti-Communists, religious conservatives, liberal intellectuals, to apolitical small business owners and farmers.

Most members of this first wave came by airlift and were thus spared lengthy hardships while in flight, but the later arrivals had it much worse. The second and third waves of Southeast Asian refugees, especially those from Laos and Cambodia in the early 1980s, had to endure prolonged periods of extreme difficulties in overseas refugee camps before resettlement. Compared to the initial group, the later arrivals were also less skilled and were less likely to have had any urban experience. This background made the adjustment to America hard. Over 60 percent of the Southeast Asian refugees spoke English with difficulty or not at all, and many lived in linguistically isolated neighborhoods. With the exception of some of the Vietnamese, they were also poorly educated, with a disproportionately large number of people lacking minimum skills to compete in the labor market. Over a third of Laotians, half of the Hmong, and 40 percent of Cambodians barely had an elementary education. These limited educational backgrounds were related to low levels of labor force participation and high unemployment. The labor force participation rate was 58 percent for Laotians, 29 percent for the Hmong, and 47 percent for Cambodians. All of these rates were far below that of the U.S. adult population (65 percent).

Given the extremely unfavorable circumstances under which they fled their own countries and the severe cultural shock they encountered in the new land, the adjustment of Southeast Asian refugees to the United States has been remarkable. Among the Vietnamese, for example, labor force status improved from 1980 to 1990 in terms of labor force participation, proportions of year-round workers, self-employed workers, and professional workers. Median household incomes also increased during this decade. More remarkable, studies on the educational experience of the second generation reveal that Vietnamese young people have been attending college at a rate similar to that of Chinese and Koreans, and at a rate much higher.
CHAPTER TWO: ZHOU, BANKSTON, KIM

than non-Hispanic whites in Los Angeles.19 Even the Hmong, who came from a preliterate peasant background, and the more recently arrived Cambodians outperformed native-born English-only American students attending the same school in San Diego.20 Nonetheless, Southeast Asians are still lagging behind their Asian American counterparts and the U.S. population by a significant margin in key socioeconomic areas, such as median household income, per capita income, poverty rate, dependency on public assistance, and home ownership. They also differ significantly from one another, with the Hmong trailing at the very bottom of the scale. Whether they will eventually achieve parity in socioeconomic status with other Asian immigrants and with native-born Americans still remains to be seen.

Having discussed the unique and enormous challenges that face Southeast Asians in the United States, we turn now to the role of religion in addressing these changes. We are interested in examining how religion can serve as a basis for reconstructing communities in diaspora and as a basis for rebuilding and maintaining the social identities of people in a strange new environment.

Religion as a Basis for Community Reconstruction and Social Identity

As we have seen, most Southeast Asian refugees came to the United States with few material belongings, little preparation for the sudden transition from agrarian to postindustrial living and radical cultural change, and no preexisting ethnic communities to receive them. Worse still for mutual assistance, the government resettlement policy dispersed them into completely unfamiliar environments. Federal and local governments implemented numerous resettlement programs, and American sponsors were enthusiastic in offering help to integrate the refugees. Still, the sponsors could not fully grasp the fact that the refugees had complex needs rooted in religious beliefs and practices, customs, diet, and traditional ways of coping with crises. Within a short period of time, the refugees started to cluster around their own people and to reconstruct, or create anew, interlocking systems of kin, friendship, and co-ethnic relations.21 As these systems have consolidated over time, they have tended to become self-sustaining, self-perpetuating communities, similar to those of other immigrants.

What was the common ground for community reconstruction among these refugees, who were disoriented, displaced, and uprooted, with little control over where and when they could settle? Prior research has found ample evidence suggesting that religion is an important source of psychological adjustment for immigrants, as well as for native-born Americans.22 Recent studies have also consistently found that religious practices are central in promoting both psychological and economic adjustment.23 The studies, however, generally lack specificity on how religions may contribute to immigrant adaptation and why religious practices may yield differential outcomes. To fill in this gap, we examine the structure and development of three Southeast Asian communities using ethnographic data. We believe that, while religion is a key cultural institution for reproducing and interpreting new forms of social relations, it can also enable a displaced group to resolve the tensions that have grown out of an entirely new set of environmental challenges. Drawing heavily and selectively on a religious heritage, group members can reconstruct or create a moral order and they can reorient old symbolic elements to a new environment. However, whether group members can successfully utilize their newly built collective identities and spiritual lives to meet new challenges in American life depends on historical patterns of homeland religious practices, specific conditions of refugee flight, the modes of incorporation, and the context of reception. The following case studies best illustrate the ways in which each ethnic community reconstructs its social and cultural lives by establishing a religious institution. In each case, the institution has been intended to serve as a cultural center. Each institution, however, also has implications for the social and economic adjustment of refugees and their children.

The Vietnamese Catholic Community of Versailles Village, New Orleans

General Background of Vietnamese American Catholicism

Vietnam is primarily a Buddhist-dominated country. Buddhism, which arrived in Vietnam from China, was the earliest foreign religion to put down roots in Vietnam. Buddhism, with about thirty million followers (or 52 percent of the total population in 1980) is also Vietnam's largest religion. Catholicism, with about three million followers, is Vietnam's second largest religion.24 Vietnam's early contacts with Europe were primarily through Catholic missionaries, particularly Jesuits, who arrived in 1615, after they had been prohibited from entering Japan. France, as the most powerful Catholic nation in the seventeenth century, was especially active in supporting these religious endeavors through the Société des Missions Etrangères. Alexandre des Rhodes, a French Jesuit, was instrumental in establishing a formidable French Catholic presence in Vietnam. Des Rhodes and other missionaries distributed Christian literature printed in a romanized system of writing, later adopted throughout Vietnam, and named quoc ngu (corresponding to the Chinese words kuo-yu, or "national language"). Through the work of missionaries, France had
become involved and influential in Vietnam during the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, long before the arrival of French colonists.

During the Nguyen Dynasty in the early nineteenth century, the Vietnamese government sponsored a revival of Confucianism in an attempt to reestablish order using the Chinese model. Believing that the spread of Catholicism was a danger to the Confucian order, the government consequently initiated a policy of persecution of Catholics in 1825. The missionaries, however, continued to be active in defiance of the imperial prohibition on mission work. The French, who had helped to establish both the Christian missions and the Nguyen Dynasty itself, were meanwhile struggling to catch up in the nineteenth-century European competition for colonies. The French Emperor Napoleon III took up the cause of the Catholics in Vietnam and used their persecution as a reason, or a pretext, for invading the country and seizing Saigon and the three surrounding provinces in 1859. French domination of Vietnam continued until after the Second World War.

Catholicism put down deep roots in Vietnam, and Vietnamese Catholicism became a culturally distinctive faith, taking on such outward traits of Asian faiths as cultic attitudes toward ancestors and filiolietic social relations. Nevertheless, some Vietnamese nationalists, especially the Communists, retained a deep suspicion of their Catholic compatriots. In turn, Vietnamese Catholics tended to view Communism as an ideology hostile to religion. In 1954, Vietnam split into a Communist-ruled north and a southern regime under the Catholic leader Ngo Dinh Diem. About one million northerners, between 600,000 and 800,000 of whom were Catholics, fled south on U.S. and French aircraft and naval vessels. Even after a military coup overthrew Diem in 1963, Catholics tended to oppose the northern Communists and their southern allies and to support the U.S. war effort in Vietnam. Thus, although Catholics make up only about 4 percent of Vietnam’s population, one-fourth to one-third of all the refugees from Vietnam to the United States following the war were Catholic.

Vietnamese Catholics in America identified closely with their religion. There were approximately 200 priests and 250 nuns in the first wave of refugees to reach the United States in 1975.28 The Vietnamese were among the largest ethnic group of vocations to the priesthood. In 1995 alone, 300 Vietnamese priests were ordained and 450 Vietnamese sisters entered religious orders. By the mid-1990s, about a quarter of the Vietnamese in the United States (or 270,000) were Catholic. The majority of the rest were Buddhist, and a small percentage adhered to the Cao Dai faith, a Vietnamese religion that blends elements of Catholicism, Buddhism, and Confucianism.

In Vietnamese American Catholic communities, the church is often the center for holidays such as Tet, the Vietnamese lunar New Year.

Churches also host specifically religious holidays that are distinctive from those of other Catholics. There has long been a special reverence for the 117 Vietnamese Martyrs who died in the persecution of Catholics at the turn of the eighteenth through the nineteenth centuries. The Vietnamese Martyrs are considered spiritual ancestors of the believers, and their feast day, November 24, is a special day of devotion. The Vietnamese also have an ethnically specific Marian cult, during the second week in May, when they celebrate the Virgin Mary under the title of Our Lady of La Vang. This devotion also dates to the persecution, when a group of persecuted Catholics had a vision of the Virgin in 1798. The believers gave her the name of Duc Phat Quan Am, after the female goddess of Buddhism. Vietnamese Catholics also have their own versions of the marriage and funeral rites, intended to emphasize family relations and connections with ancestors.

Origins of the Vietnamese Catholic Church in Versailles Village

Vietnamese refugees began arriving in New Orleans in 1975. In that year, Associated Catholic Charities, one of the primary agencies in charge of refugee resettlement in the United States, placed one thousand refugees in the Versailles Arms Apartments on the eastern edge of town. The neighborhood, known as the Versailles Village, was then going through a time of economic hardship, partially as a result of the closing of a nearby NASA plant, making apartments available at a low cost. In 1976, another two thousand Vietnamese arrived on their own. While Associated Catholic Charities continued to settle Vietnamese in the area, many other Vietnamese were drawn by ties to friends, relatives, and former neighbors.27

Versailles Village was primarily black (57 percent) and Vietnamese (43 percent) as of 1990. While the two racial groups lived in close proximity, the Vietnamese were heavily concentrated in the area around their own Catholic church. Many of the newer streets in the vicinity of the church bear Vietnamese names. The residents of Versailles Village, blacks and Vietnamese alike, were struggling economically. The median family income of the census tract was only $17,440 in 1990, and over two-thirds of the families lived below the poverty level. The Vietnamese in this neighborhood had a median family income of only $15,841, and over half of the Vietnamese families lived below the poverty level. For the city of New Orleans as a whole, at the same time, the median household income was $18,477, and 27.3 percent of families were below poverty level.

In terms of education, the Vietnamese appear to be at a considerable disadvantage compared to their non-Vietnamese neighbors. While about 60 percent of the adult residents of the neighborhood were high school graduates, only 37 percent of the adult Vietnamese had finished high
school. Unemployment among males in the labor force in the tract was 12.8 percent, and unemployment among Vietnamese males was even higher (16 percent). However, the Vietnamese were much less likely to live in female-headed households. Only 5.8 percent of Vietnamese families in the neighborhood were headed by females, compared to over one-fourth of all families. Despite the continuing poverty of the neighborhood, there is evidence that the Vietnamese achieved substantial upward mobility in the years since their arrival. For example, home ownership increased markedly, from only 15 percent in 1980 to over 37 percent in 1990, a greater than threefold increase. This is especially impressive when we consider that nearly 30 percent of these Vietnamese arrived in the United States after 1980 and over 10 percent arrived after 1985. Even this figure, however, does not take into account the growth in quality of housing for Vietnamese homeowners. During a walk or drive down the main streets of the neighborhood, even a casual observer can easily notice several large, new homes, either recently constructed or in the process of construction. All of these new homes are Vietnamese owned. Vietnamese home buying in the neighborhood had become so common that a Vietnamese developer, Mr. Hung Van Chu, created several new blocks, giving the streets Vietnamese names, such as Tu-Do (“Freedom”) and My-Viet (“America-Vietnam”). Home buying in the neighborhood has significantly revitalized an otherwise rapidly deteriorating poor area. Since the 1980s, the Vietnamese have gradually moved out of the Versailles Arms apartments—the initial focal point of their settlement—into the neighborhoods or suburbs dominated by single-family housing.

As the Vietnamese in this location achieved upward mobility, one of their first communal actions was the establishment of a religious institution. The Vietnamese here are heavily Catholic. In a survey that we conducted of secondary school students living in the area, we found that 87.3 percent were Catholic, 10.4 percent were Buddhist, 0.7 percent were Baptist, 0.7 percent were Cao Dai, and 0.5 percent gave their religion as “other.” In the early 1980s, community leaders applied to the local Catholic Archdiocese for permission to erect a church. In September 1983, the Archdiocese of New Orleans gave permission for the current large Vietnamese church to be built in Versailles Village. Funds were collected from Vietnamese Catholics throughout New Orleans and the Mary Queen of Vietnam Church was completed in May 1985.

Social Structure and Functions

Father Francis Bui, pastor of another Vietnamese church in Louisiana, explained why he thinks Vietnamese Catholic churches are needed: “We have the Vietnamese church to preserve Vietnamese culture and to pass on the language. If it wasn’t for that, we could just assimilate into other churches for religion.” Mary Queen of Vietnam Church in Versailles Village serves a number of explicit cultural preservationist purposes. Major Vietnamese festivals, such as the Tet celebration, take place in and around the church. A child development center on the church grounds is the site of classes in Vietnamese language, literature, and culture taught by lay volunteers.

The church is more than a mechanism for transmitting cultural heritage; it serves as the center of social organization for Versailles Village. The pastor of the church serves as chief spokesman and recognized leader of both church and neighborhood. He is supported by between one and two dozen influential neighborhood figures. A few of these people have influence because they have the prestige of high education and they can help people deal with the outside world in financial or legal matters; also, at least two of them are high school teachers. Others are wealthy business owners or successful owners of fishing boats who contribute financially to the church and to community projects.

At the church, people pass gossip and information. It therefore functions as a clearinghouse of useful communication, including communication about where jobs can be found. Although it was founded for the explicit or manifest purpose of providing a place for Vietnamese religious and cultural practices, it also fulfills the latent purpose of bringing people together where they can learn from each other what opportunities are available. “At church we find out everything that’s going on,” one respondent remarked. Jobs are among the things that are “going on” in this religious community. A number of respondents reported that they had found work in small shops owned by Vietnamese coparishioners through contacts at the church. It is true, of course, that they could have made these contacts elsewhere if the church had not existed. Nevertheless, the religious institution did bring people together in a place where they could exchange information about opportunities. Clerical and lay leaders of the church organize a market every Saturday, where Vietnamese people can earn money by selling foods, handicrafts, and other goods. Until the early 1990s, this market was actually held on the grounds of the church and it moved off the church grounds only because it grew too large.

Among the goods sold at the Saturday market are vegetables grown in gardens in wetlands on the outskirts of the neighborhood. The land on which these gardens are located was formerly owned by the New Orleans East Corporation, a private land development company. The Archdiocese of New Orleans reached an agreement with this company in 1978, obtaining permission for the Vietnamese to use the land. During the 1980s, the New Orleans East Corporation went bankrupt and the site of the gardens was purchased by the federal Resolution Trust Corporation (RTC). The RTC later sold the property to a New Orleans lawyer.
After negotiations by leaders of the Mary Queen of Vietnam Church on behalf of the gardeners, the lawyer agreed to lease the land to the church for a nominal fee. Thus, the church has served not only as a place to obtain information about economic opportunities, it has also served as an organizational basis for pursuit of economic interests.

Social status in the community is closely linked to position in the church. Contributions from business owners and fishermen maintain the church and, although the pastor is the official spokesman of church and community, lay committees frequently determine church activities or church policies. One Vietnamese social worker who organized activities for troubled youth in the neighborhood told us he had to get the permission of the influential lay leaders of the church in order to carry on his work.

Monsignor Dominic Luong, pastor of the Mary Queen of Vietnam Church, has noted the increased role of the laity in Vietnamese American Catholicism in contrast to Catholicism in Vietnam: “The biggest change in the Vietnamese church here over the past two decades is the participation of the laity,” said Luong. “The church in Vietnam is very clerical. Here the people are very involved.” This growing influence of lay power in Vietnamese Catholic churches has also been noted by others: “The demands on the Catholic Vietnamese community have been changing, too, as they progressed from docile obedience to the wishes of their local priests to involvement and leadership in parish life.”

Theravada Buddhist Community of Iberia Parish, Louisiana

General Background of Laotian American Theravada Buddhism

Although some of the minority groups of the Laotian mountains and highlands are animists, almost all of the ethnic Lao are Buddhists in their homeland. Many Laotians converted to Protestant Christian denominations in refugee camps in Thailand during the 1970s and 1980s or after arrival in the United States. These conversions were inspired in part by the psychological and philosophical upheavals of war and exile and in part by the fact that American church groups were the most active agencies in assisting refugees in Thailand and in sponsoring refugees in the United States. Nevertheless, a majority of Laotian Americans continue to profess Buddhism and many of the new converts to Christianity retain cultural elements of their older belief system.

Buddhism is divided into two schools of thought. The Northern School, known as Mahayana Buddhism, is the type of Buddhism found most often in China, Japan, Tibet, Korea, and Vietnam. The Southern School, called Theravada Buddhism, predominates in Laos, Thailand, Cambodia, Burma (Myanmar), and Sri Lanka. Theravada Buddhists stress the importance of becoming a monk and achieving Nirvana, a state in which there is no self or rebirth, through one’s own efforts. Mahayana Buddhists place more emphasis on help from Bodhisattvas, enlightened beings who have delayed achieving Nirvana in order to help others become enlightened.

The essence of the Buddhist faith is the belief that all worldly things are changing and impermanent. Those who are not aware of the impermanent nature of the world become attached to worldly things, and this leads to suffering. The suffering will continue as the soul goes through a cycle of rebirths, continually drawn back to worldly desires. Meditation and a moral, disciplined life can enable a believer to overcome desires. The soul that successfully overcomes all desires may reach Nirvana. The path toward Nirvana is governed by Dharma, one of the three central concepts of Buddhism. This word is frequently translated as “law,” but it refers more broadly to the order of the universe and the Buddha’s teachings on right order and belief.

The law of Karma, the second of Buddhism’s three central concepts, controls life and rebirth. This law may be seen as a kind of spiritual accounting: Good deeds, or “merit,” help the soul to be reborn in better circumstances and to earn rewards in the present life; bad deeds cause the soul to be reborn in worse circumstances and can bring about bad luck. For these reasons, “making merit” is a central part of religion for Laotians. If Dharma is a cosmological moral order, then Karma is a matter of whether or not one acts in accordance with this order. One can make merit through acts of kindness. However, becoming a monk or helping to support monks or a temple are the ways of making merit most highly regarded by Laotian people.

The sangha, the monastic community within which people can improve their own spiritual positions, is the third central concept of Buddhism. All Lao men are expected to become monks for a period of time, usually in early manhood, before marriage. It is also common for older men, especially widowers, to become monks. Even in Laos, some men are not able to fulfill the ideal of entering the temple for a time. This is even more difficult for Laotian American men because of the demands of jobs and the scarcity of temples. Because the monastic community of the temple is so closely linked to making merit by becoming a monk or by supporting monks, establishing temples and adapting monkhood to American life are key religious problems for Laotian American Buddhists.

Laotian and Thai adherents to Buddhism usually combine their canonical Buddhism with noncanonical beliefs that are sometimes referred to as “folk Buddhism.” A belief in spirits, or phi (pronounced like
the English word "pea," but with a rising tone, as in a question) dates back to the time before the Lao were introduced to Buddhism, and the spirit cult has become a part of popular Buddhist practices. Some of these spirits are the spirits of human beings following death, or "ghosts." Other phi are benevolent guardians of people and places, or malevolent beings who may cause harm and suffering.

Another important noncanonical element in Laotian Buddhism is the khouan, a mobile soul loosely attached to each human being. As one becomes involved with other people, one's own khouan has a tendency to become attached to them as well. The baci or soukhouan ceremony is one of the key rites of noncanonical Laotian Buddhism. The chanting of scriptures in the Pali language by a group of monks usually precedes the ceremony. Then, participants take bits of white cotton string as an elder layman calls upon the khouan to reenter the bodies of those present. The celebrants tie the cloth around one another's wrists. If one of those present is being especially honored, or has just returned from a journey, or is about to set out on a journey, or has experienced the death of a family member, those present will concentrate on tying the bits of cloth around this person's wrist, binding the soul to the individual.

Before tying the knot, celebrants will often place hard-boiled eggs or rice, symbols of fertility, into the palms of those whose wrists are being encircled. While tying, they will make wishes for those being honored, most often wishing them long life, good luck, and many children. While it is by no means necessary that the ceremony be performed at a temple, or at any religious site, celebrants generally prefer to hold this ritual in a place that has some religious significance.

Origins of the Laotian Buddhist Community in Iberia Parish

Laotians began moving into Iberia Parish during the early 1980s, the peak period of Laot resettlement in the United States. Their concentration in this area was a consequence of secondary migration in search of job opportunities. At this time, the federal Comprehensive Employment and Training Act (CETA) provided funding for training in pipe fitting, welding, and related skills in demand in the Gulf Coast region. When a few Laotians found this training, and the jobs that followed it, word of available employment spread through ethnic networks and others began moving to the region.

Those who arrived in New Iberia came with little capital, often relying on the help of friends and relatives and on the public assistance made available under the provisions of the U.S. Refugee Act of 1980. They had, therefore, relatively few choices in housing. They needed to seek the lowest possible rents, and many had to live in some form of public housing. Since they relied heavily on co-ethnics, they also tended to cluster tog-ether. For this reason, the Laotians initially established their first base in the southwestern part of the city, in a large apartment complex of federally subsidized section housing. As is the case with much public housing in the United States, this apartment complex is located in a poor, decaying area of the city. The neighborhood was an entirely black neighborhood before the arrival of the Lao. The houses are small and old, many of them with peeling paint and collapsing porches. Data from the 1990 census attest to the area's economic distress: The poverty level was extremely high with a median family income below $14,000; one-third of the families were headed by single females; and about 30 percent of households were receiving public assistance. It should be noted that these figures include the Laotians, among whom single female–headed families are still extremely rare. The neighborhood also suffers from many of the social ills that plague America's poor neighborhoods. One local policeman that we interviewed referred to this area as "Dodge City" because of its frequent violence, much of which appears to be drug related. This is a neighborhood that fits the definition of a ghetto.

Most Lao families contain at least two workers. Laotian male workers are concentrated in their occupational niches in pipe fitting and welding. Although the CETA training that initially drew the group to this southern city ended during the Reagan administration, it has become common for Laotian men with job skills to teach others. Those not in pipe fitting or welding are most often employed in seafood and restaurant jobs. Almost all of the women had extensive experience with sewing, embroidering, and related activities, since these were crafts traditionally passed from mother to daughter in Laos. These skills have enabled them to find work in regional textile mills. Many Laotian women found work just north of New Iberia, at a textile mill in St. Martinville. Thus, by the mid-1980s, almost all of the women were commuting to jobs in the north every day, while their husbands were commuting south to the Port of New Iberia. Even when both adults in a family held low-paying jobs, the combined incomes of two workers provided a base for upward mobility.

Like the Vietnamese in Versailles Village, there has been a trend of residential mobility. As early as the 1980s, Laotian families began to move out of the apartment complex into free-standing housing in the immediate area. Those who had managed to amass sufficient capital began to move further north, out of the neighborhood, into middle-class neighborhoods, generally settling in small clusters. By the mid-1980s, the Laotians had established clusters even further north within the city limits, purchasing comfortable suburban homes.

After the Laotians had established themselves sufficiently, they began planning to build their own community and cultural center. In 1986, a number of Laotian men generally recognized as leaders formed the
Temple Corporation, an association dedicated to building a Lao-style Buddhist temple that would be surrounded by an ethnic residential enclave. They found a tract of land in a semirural area on the northern edge of the county. The tract was relatively inexpensive, as it was outside of established residential, commercial, and industrial zones, and it was at that time unused for farming. The temple was completed a year later with surrounding streets renamed after provinces in Laos. Initially, most of the homes in the areas surrounding the temple were trailers, but members of the community set a rule that settlers would have to build a permanent home within five years of moving into the neighborhood. There was some flexibility in the enforcement of this rule, and as new people settled the area, approximately one-quarter of the homes were still trailers by 1996. However, about three-quarters were permanent buildings. According to our field interviews and observations, the newly built Laotian village held about four hundred residents in 1996. Laotians in other parts of the county regarded the temple as a center of cultural and religious traditions. During the early 1990s, the temple village began to run out of room for new households. As a consequence, the Lao started to establish homes on a stretch of land a little under a quarter mile to the west of the temple.

By the mid-1990s, there were about two to three thousand Laotians living in Iberia Parish, by our estimate. About 43 percent of Laotian households, according to our count, continued to reside within the apartment complex or its immediate environs. An estimated 19 percent of all Laotian households were in the village immediately surrounding the temple. The temple village and the settlement just to the west of the village together contained 27 percent of all Laotian households in the parish (county). The rest were scattered in free-standing housing in small clusters throughout the parish. The temple, then, had not only become a regional center for Laotians, it had also become the core of a substantial Laotian residential concentration.

Social Structure and Functions

The temple was founded to express and preserve Laotian culture in the new environment. As one informant observed, “We need this place so that we can remember who we are.” Driving in from the cane fields to the temple, the non-Laotian observer who has been to Southeast Asia may be struck by the sight of a colorful Theravada Buddhist temple in the middle of southwestern Louisiana. It is a bit like being transported from one part of the world to another. At the temple, the festivals and rites of Laos are faithfully reproduced.

Serving as a center or cultural identity may be viewed as the major manifest function of the temple. It also has important latent functions, though, notably latent functions of an economic character. In July 1998, one of the authors conducted an interview with the human resources director of a company constructing off-shore oil structures. The director estimated that about 15 percent of the company’s 5 hundred welders, fitters, and other skilled craftsmen were Laotian. The economic as well as the cultural centrality of the temple became clear:

Interviewer: How do you get most of your new Laotian workers?
Respondent: One of our foremen is the financial manager at that Buddhist whatchmacallit . . .

Interviewer: You mean the temple out in Cade?
Respondent: Yeah. People go to him for a job and he just refers them here.

In addition to connecting people with jobs, the temple also helps to connect people with homes. An adult daughter of one of the lay leaders in the temple community is employed by a bank in New Iberia as a loan officer in charge of mortgage loans. Fluent in both English and Lao, she is uniquely qualified to meet the needs of her employer and her ethnic community. Through her, the bank has access to a group of customers with a low default rate that it would otherwise miss. The new Laotian homeowners have someone who can translate for them and guide them through the financial maze of buying property. Most of the new Lao-owned houses around the temple and many of the Laotian homes throughout Iberia Parish have been financed with the assistance of this officer, who lives near the temple itself and frequently meets with customers at the religious site.

The temple is intended to preserve Laotian culture. This is a function temples in Laos do not have because the culture does not need to be preserved in the homeland. It also serves a variety of new economic needs by providing a place where network connectors can connect members of the group with jobs and financial resources. While reproducing Laos in America, then, the religious institution has changed in subtle ways that are not immediately evident from its colorful facade. These changes are in social structure, as well as in function.

In Laos, the sangha is the community of monks. It is the monks who are in charge of the religious affairs of the temple and who make decisions regarding religious matters. The laypeople support the monks with gifts of food and other offerings. The boundary between the monastic and the nonmonastic is also fairly porous. Ideally, all Laotian men should become monks at some point during their lives. However, none of the men that we talked to planned to become monks, even for a short time. As one of the informants explained: “We have jobs that we have to go to every day. Everybody has to work to get by, so we can’t take time out to go into the temple. But we still hold Buddhism. We want to make merit, so we give to the monk who’s there, and we can make merit through him.”
The economic and social context of American society has encouraged two related trends that also seem to be characteristic of other Laotian Buddhist temples in America. First, monasticism has tended to shift from being a status that most, if not all, men occupy at some time to being a specialized, professional activity. Second, there has been a shift in power from the monk or monks to the laity, who find and employ the religious professionals.

After founding the temple, the Laotian community leaders of Iberia Parish located a Buddhist monk through their contacts with Laotian communities elsewhere in the United States, and they brought in this single religious figure to serve at the temple. When we asked interviewees what they would do if the single monk currently at the temple moved to another temple, they all had the same answer: They would seek to bring in another lifelong monk from another Laotian American community. The monastic order continues to lie at the heart of social relations, and it continues to be the chief mechanism for individual moral advancement, but monasticism has become a specialized job, rather than a stage of life.

Since the laity essentially hire the religious professional, decision making in the religious institution has shifted from the monks to a committee of laypeople composed of the same successful skilled craftpeople and small businessmen who founded the temple. The author Phayvanh Phoumindr has noted a similar trend among Laotian Buddhist temples in Australia: “Temple projects in the new country are often started by lay community service groups, with some government funding. This means that the lay committee of the parent body like to continue the control of the temples, much against the wishes of many Buddhist monks who would prefer to look after their own religious affairs without the direction and interference of laypeople as was traditional in Laos.” If the shift to lay control has not led to conflict in the temple we observed, this may be a consequence of the fact that there is only one monk who has necessarily accepted the professionalization of his status.

The Cambodian Theravada Buddhist Community of Long Beach, California

General Background of Cambodian American Theravada Buddhism

Cambodians do not have a history of Catholicism, Christianity, or Confucianism. Less than 1 percent of the Cambodian population is Christian or Roman Catholic and about 90 percent of the Cambodians in Cambodia are Buddhist. Like the Laotians, most Cambodians adhere to Theravada Buddhism. Introduced to Cambodia in about the thirteenth century, Theravada Buddhism is the official religion of Cambodia. Before the Khmer Rouge era, Buddhism was embedded in the national law of Cambodia and its teachings permeated everyday life and thought of Cambodians. For the Cambodians as for the Laotians, the basic principle of Theravada Buddhism is that one earns merit toward a better life by being good and avoiding evil. Giving gifts and donations to the temple and the monks can be especially valuable ways of earning merit. Emphasizing personal development and individual good behavior, it is believed that individuals must first attain enlightenment, or Nirvana, on their own, before they can help others to reach enlightenment. Cambodian Buddhism is thus virtually the same as the Laotian Buddhism discussed previously.

Origins of the Wat Khemara Buddhikaram in Long Beach

The seeds of the Cambodian community in Long Beach were planted in the late 1950s with the establishment of an educational exchange program between Cambodia and the United States. Under this exchange program, about one hundred students from Cambodia came to Long Beach and attended the California State University at Long Beach (CSULB). The exchange program was terminated in 1963 when Prince Sihanouk nationalized foreign trade and when diplomatic relations between the United States and Cambodia weakened. When this occurred, many of the Cambodian students remained in Long Beach and established their new home in America.

The majority of Cambodians now settled in Long Beach came to the United States after Pol Pot’s rule ended with the invasion of Cambodia by Vietnam in 1978. About 120,000 Cambodians entered the United States in the five years following the Vietnamese invasion of Cambodian. Since Long Beach already had an established Cambodian community, many relocated to Long Beach. According to the 1990 U.S. Census, 17,468 Cambodians resided in Long Beach, which has a total population of 429,233. Within Long Beach (which has a majority white population), most Cambodians reside in inner-city neighborhoods with heavy black and Latino concentrations and few white residents.

Buddhism remains the primary religion in the Long Beach Cambodian community, although the community has witnessed significant conversion to Christianity, since about 12 percent of the Long Beach Cambodians are now Christians. There are at least eight Buddhist temples in Long Beach, although most of the temples are actually monks’ private residences and do not have the appearance or the functions of bigger temples. Of the two official temples in Long Beach, Wat Khemara Buddhikaram (Khmer Buddhist Temple) is the bigger and the older. Established in 1982, this temple was built when the Cambodian Buddhists in southern California unanimously elected to purchase property for this purpose in Long Beach. In order to raise money to cover the building expenses—which was a little over a million dollars—the temple
property was divided into twenty thousand shares at $50 each. The monk who headed the fund-raising to build the temple noted that in addition to the shares, it took several years of fund-raising through special ceremonies, individual donations, and a loan from the bank to build the temple. Since most of the Cambodian Buddhists were poor and on welfare, with little education and skills, individual donations reportedly ranged from $5 to $20. Unlike the Laotian case, a general increase in home buying or socioeconomic upward mobility did not precede the establishment of the Cambodian temples.

Cambodians are the most recent arrivals among the Southeast Asians in the Los Angeles-Long Beach metropolitan area and have the lowest levels of education, personal and household income, and home ownership. Ninety-five percent of Cambodians aged twenty-five years or older immigrated between 1980 and 1990 (compared to 58 percent for Vietnamese and 63 percent for Laotians). Only 5 percent of Cambodian adults are four-year college graduates. The median household income for Cambodians is $21,000, compared to $35,000 for Vietnamese and $27,000 for Laotians. Cambodians, foreign or U.S. born, also have the lowest personal incomes among the Southeast Asian refugee groups. Only 19 percent of Cambodians own homes, compared with 44 percent of the Vietnamese. Most of the housing units for Cambodian residents are run-down and located in ghettoized areas known for poverty and gang violence. Gang-related violence is prevalent in the Cambodian community. Cambodian gangs are known to extort protection money from co-ethnic individuals and businesses. There is also gang violence between Cambodians and their Latino neighbors on the streets and in public schools.

Apparantly, the Cambodian community has not gathered enough strength to influence the lives of co-ethnics as effectively as the Vietnamese in New Orleans and Laotians in New Iberia. Poverty and welfare dependency only partially explain this problem. What makes the community tenuous, we believe, is the lack of education and skills, compounded by a long history of colonization, postwar trauma in the homeland, recency of arrival, and a general distrust of authority and organization resulting from past colonial and war experiences. The Cambodians went through the most extreme hardships of all the refugee groups. Individuals who saw parents, spouses, children, and sometimes most or all members of their families die under horrific conditions during the Khmer Rouge period are common.

Even though Long Beach has the greatest concentration of Cambodians outside of Cambodia, there is no designated name for the Cambodian community and most inner-city Cambodian residents seem to simply merge into the urban underclass. The abbot of the temple and the fund-raising chairman reported to us that many Cambodians were poor and uneducated and that socioeconomic mobility of Cambodians did not precede or coincide with the development of the temple. Demographic data support these observations.

Social Structure and Functions

In both the Vietnamese and Laotian cases, the religious institution had a latent function of serving as a network center of economic activities, and there was a tendency in both toward an increase in the organizational power of the laity. These two tendencies are not immediately evident in the Wat Khemara Buddhikaram in Long Beach. The lack of an apparent economic function cannot be attributed to the fact that the Cambodian temple is a nonprofit, public benefit corporation under the laws of the State of California. Indeed, the other two religious organizations are also nonprofit corporations. The religious and lay leaders of all three organizations continually stressed that they saw the main functions of their institutions as religious, cultural, and social. Church and temple leaders and participants in all cases would have strongly opposed using the church or temple for personal benefit or economic gain. Opposition to the intentional use of religious institutions for personal gain is completely consistent with a latent economic function. Latent institutional functions are, by definition, neither intended nor sought after. Neither the Vietnamese nor the Laotians described previously would see themselves as “using” their church or temple for personal profit, and most would be understandably upset if it were suggested that they did so. In the Cambodian case, the absence of a discernible economic function for the temple appears to be a consequence of the dire financial and social situation of the temple’s adherents. The temple does not provide them with a place to make contacts and exchange information about jobs and resources because there are so few resources to exchange. Similarly, the increasing power of the laity that we saw in different forms among the Vietnamese and the Laotians is not evident among the Cambodians because the latter have not yet achieved widespread socioeconomic mobility. Control therefore remains in the hands of religious specialists, as in the homeland.

The temple does, however, play a crucial social and cultural role for the Cambodians. Through the temple, fellow compatriots can preserve their cultural heritage, revive a sense of community, and share experiences of adaptation to their new home. The temple is used as a “Treasure-House” of Cambodian tradition where Cambodian arts; architecture; civilization; education; and physical, mental, and spiritual health can be stored and preserved. The Khmer Buddhist Monastery organizes at least seven traditional religious and cultural ceremonies for the Cambodian community each year. The annual New Year celebration, with rich Buddhist ceremonies, usually held on the 13th and 14th of April, is a particularly big
and listening to unfamiliar Buddhist chants in Pali (the sacred language of Cambodian and Lao Buddhists).

Though the temple has some trouble recruiting younger members, many Cambodians in Long Beach believe that the future of rebuilding the Cambodian community lies with the second generation. Since most of the educated and skilled elite were killed by the Khmer Rouge in Cambodia, the first-generation Cambodians in the United States have little education and limited English ability. As a result of the civil war experience, many first-generation Cambodians distrust their leaders. They feel that they have lost control over their own lives, and many are still haunted by the memories of genocide. As one member pointed out, they “have broken hearts” as a result of the war and refugee process. In a recent interview, a Cambodian community leader and political historian stated, “There is no leadership in the [Cambodian] community. People have lost faith. They don’t trust leaders. They don’t believe in themselves.” In contrast, the second-generation children are more educated than their parents and have greater familiarity with the new country. They are also more able than the first generation to detach themselves from the traumatic memories of genocide and refugee camps. In this way, the second-generation Cambodians, particularly those who are bilingual and maintain close ties to the temple and community, can help rebuild the Cambodian community and reunify the Cambodian people.

Discussion and Conclusion

The three religious organizations that we have examined here show both similarities and differences. In each of these three cases, the church or temple was founded explicitly to serve as a center for cultural identity. The religious institutions were established in order to give individuals a sense of who they are within a group and in order to create a basis for collective action. As Robert Bellah has pointed out, religion provides identity and motivation to groups and to individuals as members of groups. In contrast to nonimmigrant congregations, though, the provision of collective identity and motivation for Southeast Asian refugees was self-consciously reconstructive in character. Previously, we quoted a Vietnamese pastor’s words: “We have the Vietnamese church to preserve Vietnamese culture…” The Cambodians and Laotians repeatedly told us much the same thing.

American Baptists or Catholics do not establish their churches to express or perpetuate some version of being American. In Vietnam, Laos, and Cambodia, similarly, adherents to local faiths do not see maintaining a cultural identity as the primary goal of a temple or church. For immigrants,
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however, religion becomes an essential symbol of ethnic identity, an emblem of the old life in the midst of the new. Ironically, Vietnamese Catholicism or Cambodian Buddhism becomes “more Vietnamese” or “more Cambodian” in America than in Vietnam or Cambodia as a result.

The employment of religion as a source of cultural identity is arguably more important for these refugees than it is for other immigrants. As we have pointed out in our overview of the backgrounds of these groups, they did not simply migrate from their homelands. They lost their homelands. Fleeing countries shattered by war, they lost the social statuses they occupied and the social structures that defined their lives. Because they arrived in America estranged, isolated, and dispersed, building new communities meant more than simply gathering together. They had to draw on their memories to create new communities of meaning.

Through participation in ethnically based religions, the refugee groups can make sense out of their new lives. They can, in Peter Berger’s words, carve “an area of meaning . . . out of a vast mass of meaninglessness.” Rituals and ceremonies are critical to the production of meaning. Creating a web of cultural symbols in the new homeland has meant looking to the future, as well as to the past. For this reason, the temples and the church give a special emphasis to the socialization of the young. These are places where American-born or American-reared young people can learn the languages and customs that link their elders to memories of the homeland.

There is a broad similarity among these three religious organizations in the ways in which they help to define individuals as members of groups. Still, we also see some differences in the ways in which the religious organizations serve as bases for collective action. The Vietnamese and Laotian religious organizations that we have discussed served communities in the process of substantial upward mobility. The religious organizations were therefore affected by that mobility and helped to facilitate its continuation. The Vietnamese church and the Laotian temple were certainly not established for business purposes or to promote the financial well-being of their adherents. Nevertheless, they did serve latent economic functions by providing network centers for people who were achieving upward mobility and could assist each other. The Cambodian temple did not, as far as we could tell, play a major role in the economic adaptation of its adherents, although it was also an ethnic network focus. While it is possible that Cambodian Buddhists do informally exchange information about jobs and other opportunities as a consequence of religious participation, it appears that they have only limited information to exchange.

We can understand why the Cambodian religious organization differs from the other two by reflecting on how the challenges facing the Cambodians differ from those facing the other two groups. The Cambodians have suffered the most traumatic and drastic experiences in the troubled history of Southeast Asia. Haunted by memories of the genocidal Khmer Rouge years, the Cambodians are still chiefly concerned with mending their “broken hearts.” They have not yet begun the struggle to create places for themselves in the economy of the New World. Hence, they continue to be economically marginal by almost all objective measures. Their collective action still revolves around basic social psychological adjustment, around trying to make some sense out of an anomic present and a chaotic past.

A second characteristic that sets the Cambodian organization apart from the other two is the relative lack of lay control over the religious institution. As we have seen, lay power in both the Vietnamese and Laotian institutions increased substantially, compared to churches and temples in their homelands. Organizing committees and raising funds tended to place power in the hands of the laypeople charged with these responsibilities. Here, again, it is important to note that the Vietnamese and Laotian communities were in a process of rapid socioeconomic adaptation. The adherents were becoming people who could exercise some control over their own lives and over their organizations. The Cambodians, traumatized and confused, with low levels of income, education, and home ownership, have relied on direction from traditional authorities. Since the refugees from Cambodia, in general, remain financially and psychologically unprepared to begin entry into the host society, the position of the monks may even have been enhanced. As representatives of the central social institution, the monks are often the only ones in the group who can achieve an understanding of the host society as well as that of the home country. The head monk of the Wat Khemara Buddhakaramon has a doctorate degree. This makes him one of the few highly educated people in the Cambodian community. Among the groups experiencing rapid socioeconomic mobility, then, we find an increase in lay power. The relative lack of socioeconomic mobility results in an intensification of clerical power.

On this issue of lay control, we also see some differences between the Vietnamese and the Laotians, although both did display general trends toward increasing lay influence. These trends were much less marked, though, in the Vietnamese institution, because its religious figures were part of the established hierarchy of the American Catholic Church. The Laotian Buddhist temple, as a more radical transplant, saw a much greater expansion of the role of the laity accompanying mobility upward into American society. Thus, both the organizational fit between the immigrant religion and the American context and the socioeconomic position of the group shape changes in immigrant religious organizations.
A final area of variation among these groups concerned housing and settlement. Among the Vietnamese and the Laotians, the establishment of religious institutions followed the spread of home ownership. In the Vietnamese case, the church became the geographical center of a preexisting ethnic residential concentration. In the Laotian case, the temple was founded as people were moving into owner-occupied housing, but it was founded away from the initial site of settlement. These differences may be attributed to variations in the availability of land and housing. The Cambodian temple was established for people who had not yet managed to achieve substantial home ownership. The Cambodians were still largely confined to a low-income urban neighborhood. For this reason, the Cambodian institution was built outside of the Cambodian neighborhood, in a somewhat higher income Filipino-dominated area located about twenty minutes by car from the homes of most Cambodians. This temple has yet to give rise to a surrounding Cambodian settlement.

R. Stephen Warner has noted that the religions of new immigrant groups are both central to their lives in the new homeland and surprisingly under-studied. We believe this three-part case study addresses this situation by providing some insight into the role of religion in the adaptation of Southeast Asian refugees in the United States. We have examined the critical part played by religious organizations among these newest pieces in the American mosaic. We have also attempted to suggest some general patterns. First, we have seen that all of the religious organizations have the manifest function of providing a sense of cultural identity and continuity to people who are struggling to make sense of new lives in a new world. Ironically, the religious institutions have come to symbolize home countries in ways that similar institutions in the home countries did not. Second, we have seen that religious organizations tend to take on unintended economic functions, particularly when immigrant communities are in the process of upward socioeconomic mobility. Third, socioeconomic position in the host country tends to reshape the organizational form of the immigrant religious institution. Among upwardly mobile ethnic groups, the influence of the laity increases. In a struggling, estranged group, traditional forms of clerical power can even be enhanced. Fourth, if there is movement into owner-occupied housing (usually a key aspect of upward mobility), a religious institution can provide both a geographical focal point and a place for exchanging information about housing opportunities. The patterns that we have identified here can, we believe, be found in other Southeast Asian communities and among other immigrant groups. We are therefore proposing the findings in this chapter as a basis for studying the role of religion in immigrant adaptation. Rebuilding spiritual lives, we suggest, is often a necessary basis for rebuilding communities.

Notes

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13. Rumbaut, "Vietnamese, Laotian, and Cambodian Americans."
16. Cuban and Russian refugees are also older (median ages of 47 and 50, respectively, as of 1990), while Southeast Asian refugees comprise the youngest populations, with median ages of 26 or lower (13 for the Hmong). Russians mostly Jews, also had the support of the Jewish community in the United States.
CHAPTER TWO: ZHOU, BANKSTON, KIM


18. Among the Vietnamese elite group, over half were Catholics and about a quarter were Buddhists. See William T. Liu, Maryanne Lamanna, and Alice Murata, Transition to No Where: Vietnamese Refugees in America (Nashville, Tenn.: Charter House, 1979).


25. Although we use some U.S. Census data to describe the Vietnamese parish in New Orleans, our data are chiefly qualitative. One of the authors of this chapter (Bankston) worked as an English-as-a-second-language teacher, a high school substitute teacher, and a volunteer with a youth group in the Vietnamese community of New Orleans from 1990 to 1995. During this time, he conducted both formal and informal interviews with residents and witnessed changes in community structure. Another author (Zhou) also did fieldwork in this neighborhood in 1994 and 1995. For details, see Zhou and Bankston, Growing Up American.


28. For a newspaper report of these events, see Joan Treadway, “Gardeners’ Meeting with New Landlord Fruitful,” Times-Picayune, August 21, 1994, B3.

29. Quoted in Dorothy Vidulich, “Religion Central for Vietnamese in U.S.”

30. Vidulich, “Religion Central for Vietnamese in U.S.”


33. On our description of the Laotian Buddhist Community in Iberia Parish is based on fieldwork conducted throughout 1996 and 1997. One of the authors (Bankston) attended temple events and maintained social contacts with Laotians in the region throughout this period and after. In addition to information collected through this participant observation, we also conducted sixty-three unstructured interviews with Laotian immigrants. Again, we also make use of census data, although census information on the Laotians is more limited than the information on the Vietnamese.


43. Hopkins, *Braving a New World*.


45. However, various other sources estimate the population to be much larger; see Needham, *Cultural Concepts of Literacy Learning and Literacy Uses*.


47. The qualitative data for the Cambodian Buddhist community in Long Beach was gathered from 1998 to 1999 by one of the authors (Kim) who resided in the Long Beach community for fifteen years. She attended the temple worship services and conducted personal interviews with Cambodian Buddhists and community members. She also conducted telephone interviews with community leaders and informants. In addition, census data was used to obtain information on Cambodians in Long Beach.


