TRADITIONAL SOUTHEAST ASIAN FUNERAL PRACTICES: A STUDY
OF CULTURAL MAINTENANCE, ENVIRONMENTAL ADAPTATIONS,
AND EFFECTS OF WESTERN FUNERAL PRACTICES IN THE
UNITED STATES

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Susan Phay
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The Undersigned Faculty Committee Approves the

Thesis of Susan Phay:

Traditional Southeast Asian Funeral Practices: A Study of Cultural Maintenance,
Environmental Adaptations, and Effects of Western Funeral Practices in the
United States

Jill Esbenshade, Chair
Department of Sociology

Jung Min Choi
Department of Sociology

Kristen Hill-Maher
Department of Political Science

June 25, 2012
Approval Date
DEDICATION

For Bapha Phay, who inspired this thesis and will never be forgotten.
ABSTRACT OF THE THESIS

Traditional Southeast Asian Funeral Practices: A Study of Cultural Maintenance, Environmental Adaptations, and Effects of Western Funeral Practices in the United States

by

Susan Phay
Master of Arts in Sociology
San Diego State University, 2013

Death, dying and the funeral has changed as society has transformed due to the impacts of industrialization and modernity. The dominant discourse in Western views of death is that it is taboo and society denies death exists. The challenge to this view is the assumption that the United States is not homogenous in its people and culture where only one approach is used to examine society’s perspective on death and dying.

This paper investigates the traditional Lao-Cambodian funeral practices and the social forces that have caused the Lao-Cambodian funeral practice to change since the population has arrived in America. This paper will describe the funeral ceremonies and practices that occur at the time of death, and examine the economic and social implications of these practices for the community and family. The article examines how and why the funeral practices of immigrant Lao-Cambodians in Southern California have changed. As context, I also examine other groups that have assimilated their funeral practices after immigrating to a new country.

I argue that ethnic groups adapt their funeral practices in the new society out of necessity given the social forces that they face in their new home. These structural forces are legal constraints, economic and logistical barriers, influences from Western funeral practices, and change in geographic location. Economic status, level of assimilation, social standing in the Lao community, religion, moral obligation to the deceased, and beliefs in the funeral practices will also influence how one performs contemporary Lao-Cambodian funeral customs. Immigrants adopt American policies and services when they are beneficial to their people and when they are required to or think they are. Through participant observation and in depth interviews, this ethnographic study will explore how the Lao deal and view death and their reasons for funeral adaptation. On a larger scale, this study will contribute to literature on assimilation, Southeast Asians and Southeast Asian funeral practices.
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CHAPTER 1

INTRODUCTION

Society has transformed throughout time in the traditional, modern and postmodern periods yet perspectives on death in America remain seen as taboo or that death does not exist (Howarth 2007). What about cultures and societies that view death as an inevitable part of life? How does this affect the way they deal with death? Does it make grieving and life after death easier to move on from? Does it make them less afraid of dying? Many of my thoughts, curiosities, and questions about death came to me when my 75 year old grandmother died in 2009.

We held a traditional Lao-Cambodian Buddhist funeral fused with Animism and Western funeral practices. Taking place over 7 days, followed by a 100 day boun (observance) 3 months after the funeral, I questioned how the traditional Lao-Cambodian funeral resisted assimilation of some of the Western funeral practices. Which funeral rituals were brought over from the homeland? Which practices began since arrival in the United States? Why were new practices adopted and followed? I asked my mother, uncles, and various guests about why we followed certain rituals. The common response was: “I don’t know,” or “Because this is what I was taught by my parents and the elders.” These responses were not good enough for me so those questions became my thesis for graduate school. I wondered, how would I be able to perform these funeral practices for my parents if I cannot understand why and how the funeral practices came to be? How will future generations be able to preserve these funeral practices if we are do not learn about them? How have they accepted death as a natural part of life?

BACKGROUND

America is a multicultural society with a rich multicultural history (Takaki 2008). America’s landscape and history is based on immigration of various ethnic groups from all over the world who came to inhabit the land of the indigenous people (Takaki 2008; Zinn 1995). Many aspects of culture are impacted by a change in the environment. Southeast
Asians are among some of the many groups that have immigrated to America. Coming from a war torn country that had been occupied by France, Vietnam, and the United States, the Lao and Hmong became refugees in their own country. Forced out of Laos, many sought neighboring countries as temporary homes while conflict in their home country decreased the government gained stability. The Lao who immigrated and lived in Cambodia also faced political persecution from the Khmer Rouge in the 1970s, forcing them to flee their homes. The Lao-Cambodian’s culture remains distinctly Laos, but they have been influenced somewhat by the Thai and Cambodians. With the largest concentration of Southeast Asians living in Southern California (Kitano and Daniels 2000), the outside community still does not know very much about this group.

As of 2010, there are approximately 14.7 million Asians in America. Between the year 2000 and 2010, Asians grew faster than any other racial group jumping from 10.2 million in 2000 to approximately 14.7 million in 2010 (Humes, Jones, and Ramirez 2011). The term “Asian American” refers to over 20 nationality groups, according to Kitano (1981), but many who are classified under this term do not refer themselves as so. Asians are assumed to “all look alike” (Kitano 1981:126). In reality, each ethnic group has a distinct culture and history. Southeast Asians came to America, escaping from political persecution in their country (Kitano 1981). Southeast Asians refugees includes, “Cambodians, Laos, and Vietnamese, and there are many who can be labeled ethnically Chinese” (Kitano 1981:137). Southeast Asians in particular, have had considerably less success in America compared to other Asian groups such as the Chinese, Japanese, and Koreans. The history of immigration to the United States of the Chinese, Japanese, and Koreans compared to the Southeast Asians is drastically different. The latter was forced to leave their country because of fear of political persecution, while the former came to America primarily in search of employment. There is a significant gap between these groups in terms of wealth, education and overall quality of life attainment (Ngo and Lee 2007). These Asian groups, similar to other immigrant groups with low socio-economic status, continue to face problems in living in a new country.

The term Southeast Asia typically refers to countries below China, which includes Vietnam, Burma (formerly Myanmar), Lao People’s Democratic Republic (Laos), Thailand, Malaysia, Singapore, Indonesia, and the Philippines (SarDesai 1981). Laos is surrounded by
Burma and China to the northwest, Cambodia to the south, Thailand to the west and Vietnam to the east. Thailand is the only country in the region that has not been occupied or dominated by Western colonial countries nor has it been governed and conquered by neighboring countries (Blanchard 1958; Chandler 1983; SarDesai 1981; Stuart-Fox 1997).

Laos is an ethnically diverse country that was ruled first by early periods of the Lao Unified Kingdom with roots in the ancient Lao kingdom of Lan Xuang (Stuart-Fox 1997). Falling to Siam’s (Thailand) domination in the late 18th and 19th century, Laos was later acquired by French imperialism in 1893 to 1945 (Stuart-Fox 1997). The French wanted Laos in order to gain control of the Mekong River, acquire Lao territories that could be added to Vietnam, and the French wanted to control Thailand, formerly Siam (Stuart-Fox 1997). Japan followed with a brief occupation of Laos, only later to be reoccupied by the French again in 1946. From 1945 to 1957, Laos continued to gain independence and unity as a country. The period 1958 to 1975 was a tumultuous period in Laos marked by newly collapsed governments, rigged elections, the U.S. bombing of communist targets, and failed governing political reforms (Stuart-Fox 1997). In 1975, Laos went from a constitutional monarchy to a communist people’s republic, ruled by the Lao People’s Revolutionary Party. The Laos model of government was similar to China, ruling the state with one-single party where power was central to a few individuals, with a free-market economy.

Laos remains an underdeveloped, poor country. The size of Utah, Laos has a population of approximately 6,477,211 people as of 2011 (“Laos”). Laos has a population that is 55% ethnically Lao, 11% Khmu, 8% Hmong, and 26% are part of 100 other minority groups in Laos. Three main ethnic groups make up the population. The Lao Sung (mountain people), who come from the Tai ethno-linguistic heritage and the mountain tribes Hmong-Yao and Tibeto-Burman live in northern Laos. The predominant ethnic group in Laos are the Lao Theung (highlanders) that come from the Austro Asiatic tribes. The Lao Lum (lowlanders) makes up about half of the population. Other ethnic minorities that live in Laos are the Chinese and Vietnamese (“Laos”).

The dominant language is Lao, which is from the Tai linguistic group (“Laos”). Theravada Buddhism is the dominant religion that is also incorporated with Animism among

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the mountain tribes that easily exist together. Animism is the belief that all natural things, humans and objects such as trees, the mountains or rivers and natural phenomena have a energy, life, and abstract quality of their own. Natural phenomena and objects have a soul or “indeterminate energy…[which was] correlated with what a particular entity looked like and its place in the landscape” (Perdersen 2001:414) and exist in the world together. Other religions practiced in Laos are Christianity and Islam.

Cambodia is located below Laos, with Thailand to the northeast and Vietnam to the west. Scholars are unsure of the origins of Cambodia (Chandler 1983). With a population of approximately 13.4 million as of 2008, Cambodia today is run by a multiparty democratic government under a constitutional monarchy. Cambodia ethnically is primarily 90% Cambodian, 5% Vietnamese, 1% Chinese, and 4% of a combination of smaller minority groups of hill tribes Cham and Laos. It remains unclear where the people of Cambodia came from, how long people have inhabited Cambodia, and what language was spoken before writing was introduced (Chandler 1983). Like its neighbor Laos, Cambodia’s primary religion is Theravada Buddhism, with smaller groups who practice Islam, Christianity and Animism (Chandler 1983).

Cambodia’s past illustrates a history of early rule by the Hindu state of Funan, the Kingdom of Angkor, and the Dark Ages from the fifteenth century to the nineteenth century. What followed was Thailand’s and Vietnam’s expansion over Cambodia, and French colonialism in the late nineteenth century into the summer of 1940 (Chandler 1983; SarDesi 1981). In the early twentieth century, Cambodia began to see an emergence of a new elite group of educated Cambodians from the French education system, concentrated in Phnom Penh (Chandler 1983). Up until 1975, Cambodia struggled to find its own national identity and governmental stability after French independence. Various parties emerged such as the Democratic Party, the Liberal Party (“Freedom Group”), and the Khmer People’s Revolutionary Party (KPRP) that was formed after the Indochinese Communist Party (ICP) dissolved in 1951 (Chandler 1983). One infamous person that rose from the educated elite was Saloth Sar, better known as Pol Pot. Perhaps the most devastating event to hit Cambodia was the Khmer Rouge, a genocide of an estimated 2 million Cambodians that was orchestrated by Pol Pot in 1975 after he came to power (Chandler 1983; SarDesi 1981). This was an attempt to reconstruct Cambodia into Pol Pot’s ideal, agrarian country. Any persons
whom the regime believed to have considerable influence on society such as professors, teachers, doctors, dancers, singers, or persons thought to have any intellect, were killed. Millions of Cambodians and other ethnic groups were displaced, killed, tortured, and enslaved during the Khmer Rouge (Chandler 1983, 1996; SarDesi 1981). Many Cambodian citizens were now refugees. As a result, these groups immigrated to various places around the world.

The primary language is Khmer (Chandler 1983; SarDesi 1981). Southeast Asians came to the United States in two waves; first beginning in 1954 when they were comprised of “military personnel, civil servants, teachers, farmers, fisherman, employees of the Americans, and Catholics” (Kitano and Daniels 2000:78). The second wave immigrated in the 1970s and 1980s fleeing from political persecution from their homeland (Kitano and Daniels 2000:79). The second waves of immigrants were less educated and poorer than those of the first wave (Lin-Fu 1988:19). Many Lao and Cambodians came to America as part of the second wave immigration. The Lao who could not live under communist rule after the overthrow of the government in 1975 fled. Cambodians, Lao and other ethnic groups living in Cambodia sought refuge from the Khmer Rouge under the communist rule of Pol Pot. As of the year 2000, Vietnamese, Hmong, Cambodian, and Lao totaled over 1.8 million Southeast Asians in the United States (Yang 2004:127). Southern California has one of the largest Southeast Asian populations outside of Southeast Asia. The West has the largest number of Asians, with 49% of the group’s population.

Immigration and moving to a new homeland comes with many unforeseen conflicts. In the US, groups who look physically different, particularly where their skin color is not white, are less likely to be accepted by their new community who represent the majority (Park 1950; Takaki 2008). Others who are identified or perceived to be European or white are easily accepted and assimilated into their new host community (Park 1950; Takaki 2008). Southeast Asian immigrants are an example of a group that was not easily accepted in America (Kitano and Daniels 2000). Immigrants adopt American policies and services when they are beneficial to their people. Kitano notes that Asian Americans, in particular, are “expected to know the language and culture of their ancestors and to retain a loyalty to their home countries in a way that is not expected of European immigrants” (1981:125). Asian
Americans are therefore placed in another category by others and given different expectations compared to other ethnic groups who also immigrated to America.

**PURPOSE OF STUDY**

The purpose of this thesis is to explore why and how traditional Southeast Asian Lao-Cambodian funeral practices have changed in Southern California using an ethnographic design. The scope of the project proved better suited to focus on one group, thus I chose Lao-Cambodian immigrants in Southern California who predominantly live in the Inland Empire region. This group is unique because of their immigration history. Ethnically Lao, but born in Cambodia as their family left Laos in the early 19th (approximately in 1823) century to escape political persecution from then Siam. During the escape, the Lao left Laos, went briefly to Thailand, and finally settled in Cambodia, only to ironically face the same fate in Cambodia nearly a century later. Thus, there are few differences from their fellow Lao born in Laos, such as different use of vocabulary, different Lao accent, and fluency in Khmer. For simplicity, I may refer to the group as the Lao in this paper.

This study investigates what social forces have caused Lao-Cambodian traditional funeral practice to change or stay the same in a new environment. This paper will describe the funeral ceremonies and practices that occur at the time of death, and examine the economic and social implications of these practices for the community and family. Much remains to be written about their funeral rituals, particularly how they have adapted their traditional funeral practices in America. The study’s purpose is seven fold:

1. What are traditional Lao-Cambodian funeral practices? How has the traditional Lao-Cambodian funeral practice changed since the Lao have immigrated to the United States? What are these changes and what has caused the funeral practice to change? How has assimilation influenced the funeral practice?
2. How do experiences of death, dying and grief differ in the Lao-Cambodian community compared to Western society? What accounts for these differences? What affects do factors such as age, socio-economic status, ethnicity, religion, culture, family, and community have on these experiences?
3. How does the Lao-Cambodian community make sense of their mortality?
4. How is death managed in the Lao-Cambodian community?
5. How are the deceased remembered and why might they be important to the Lao-Cambodian community?
6. What does the funeral practices symbolize for the community?
7. What social forces impact change within the community in their funeral practices? Are there new emerging cultural patterns that have changed throughout the years since their arrival in the United States?

I hope this thesis will demonstrate how Western culture has impacted the Lao-Cambodian funeral practice. The Lao-Cambodian immigration and transition in a modern society to some degree, has created some advances for their funeral practices, but the Lao maintain at the heart what their funeral practice has meant to them from their homeland. The Lao have not questioned the influence of Western funeral practices because of the US political power and influence and have incorporated Western funeral practices, as they view it the law of the land.

I argue that the Lao adapt their funeral practices in the new society out of necessity and depending on various social forces that they face in their new home. These structural forces are legal constraints, economic and logistical barriers in Western funeral practices, influences from Western culture, and the change in geographic location for the Lao. Economic status, level of assimilation, social standing in the Lao community, religion, moral obligation to the deceased, and beliefs in the funeral practices will also influence how one performs contemporary Lao-Cambodian funeral customs. This study will add to literature on traditional and American Southeast Asian funeral practices and how this group, particularly the Lao-Cambodian, has maintained or lost part of its culture because of immigration and living in a new homeland.
CHAPTER 2

LITERATURE REVIEW

The study of death and dying has gained popularity in Western societies (Howarth 2007). Death can reveal many aspects about cultural values and central social interaction (Kearl 1989). Who we are, our beliefs and values do not only come from our individual self, but also results from the social environment we occupy collectively (Kearl 1989). This can be seen through the funeral, how the body is handled after death, and how the persons involved handle the situation. Mortality is a very complex subject that has evolved historically because of human evolution. To understand death and dying, we must look at it from a historical, sociological, and individual point of view. Views on death will vary from ethnic group, culture and personal beliefs. When groups move from their homeland to another place, they may assimilate and adopt their new home’s perspective and practices about death. Lastly, I investigate how other groups who have moved from their homeland changed and adapted their funeral practices in their new living environment.

DEATH AND DYING

Typically, societies view death based on three typologies: death-accepting, death-denying, and death-defying (Gorer 1973; Howarth 2007; Kearl 1989). In Western society, most scholars view death in which societies deny death exists or see death as a taboo (Howarth 2007; Kearl 1989; Kellehear 2007), as was the case when studying death and dying became popular (Lofland 1976). Howarth (2007) argues that the problem with this view is that scholars assume that “Western society are socially and culturally homogenous and that whole societies can be identified as sharing one cultural approach” (18). Furthermore, death and dying can be investigated from three additional perspectives based on different types of societies: the traditional society, the modern society, and the post-modern society (Walter 1996). It has also been suggested that death in modern society has been “sequestered” in that death is only experienced in the private realm of the family and individual (Howarth 2007). British sociologist Geoffery Gorer argued that modern society has avoided facing death
which has produced “death-denying” societies, where death is only deemed acceptable in the medical or scientific discourses (Gorer 1973; Howarth 2007). Indeed, notions behind funerals, death and dying are socially constructed and have changed in the traditional, modern, and postmodern society, but studying death within these three frameworks does not capture the complexity of death in society (Howarth 2007).

As the human race evolved, everything surrounding them did as well. Although it remains unclear how the human race began, it is generally believed humans were a hunter gathering people (Kellehear 2007). During this period, humans were not aware of the “otherworld,” (Kellehear 2007:7) or what is “the world beyond our senses” (Kellehear 2007:7). Death was unanticipated, so it was a challenge to prepare for it. According to Kellehear, we lived in small societies where we were wanderers looking for food and shelter. There was no divide between human nature and animal nature. From the hunter gathering culture, humans evolved into what Kellehear (2007) calls a settlement community. Farmers and rural villagers lived along side hunter gatherers, and also lived longer than their ancestors before them. People were living in close knit communities, and wanted a “good death” (Kellehear 2007:7). Here in the settlement community, people became aware of death as a “this-world” activity and otherworld activity as well (Kellehear 2007:7). Kellehear states the other world was an invisible place where people may suddenly find themselves after an unanticipated death. Cities emerged after the settlement period where people wanted to have “well managed deaths,” in a state where strangers were living side by side for various reasons, be it economical, political, or military (Kellehear 2007). The poor and rural wanted to prepare for death, and the urbanites wanted “to tame the chaos and uncertainty of impending death” (Kellehear 2007:7). As humans have come into the modern age, various factors such as one’s religion, gender, ethnicity and social class came to affect mortality rates (Kellehear 2007). Advances in the modern age in the areas of technology, medicine and public health, has helped prolong life. However, “new or revived infections of recent modernity, such as HIV or tuberculosis, go where sexual and poverty action is” (Kellehear 2007:7). The modern age, according to Kellehear (2007), has produced neither good deaths nor well-managed deaths but has made us fear, question, avoid, and be ashamed of talking about death.
What may help society understand mortality is often examined through the medical, religious and cultural lens. Medicalization, in sociological terms, is when medicine is used to explain social life (Howarth 2007). Death and dying, then focuses on how medicine and its technological advances explains and prolongs death. Medicalization has become another means of social control by defining what is “normal” and “healthy” to the general population (Howarth 2007; Zola 1972) while also dehumanizing death (Howarth 2007; Illich 1976). In the medical setting, dying occurs in silence, away from family members, where patients are often powerless to the higher hands of medicine in this setting (Howarth 2007).

Religion also has the ability to guide many aspects of people’s lives. Austrian sociologist Peter Berger argues that religion is central to understanding how societies continue in the time of death (Berger 1969; Howarth 2007). Societies have created a “sacred cosmos” which is a place that is beyond everyday life and death existence (Howarth 2007). Religion serves as a “sacred canopy” sheltering people against realities of dying (Howarth 2007; Vernon 1970; Yinger 1957). Religion has been a force that assures its followers that they continue to live on after death, and helps them adjust to death (Vernon 1970). Thus, “every culture has a coherent mortality thesis whose explanations of death are so thoroughly ingrained that they are believed to be right by its members” (Kearl 1989:22). Perhaps “conceptualizations of death are so profoundly shaped cultural meaning that any change in the quality of death or in the envisioning of the hereafter is amplified through the entire social order, bringing changes from the top to bottom, from the relative power of different social institutions to the language of everyday life” (Kearl 1989:23). Howarth (2007) points out that a problem that can occur when conceptualizing death around culture is too much emphasis on culture only.

One cannot always rely on social and cultural perspectives to understand dying. Theory, social structure, and the individual self are important, but one must consider other characteristics such as gender, race, sexuality, age and disability that shape understandings about mortality and may intercept each other at one point or another (Howarth 2007). As individuals, meaning in our life is shaped by the meanings we associate with different symbols. The symbol of immortality is how various symbols represent and shape one’s conceptualization and meaning of our own immortality without use of verbal communication.
Although the originator of the symbol interprets the meaning one way, someone else may draw different conclusions (Vernon 1970).

Death also is a time that signifies the deceased and their family member’s status in the community. In addition, it reaffirms the social structure of the community (Vernon 1970). Casket quality, number of floral arrangements and type of grave markers are some indicators that signifies the status of the deceased (Vernon 1970). Death can also be a means of social control for society. Vernon (1970) state in times of war, death is used to achieve a temporal goal. In addition, sanctions of capital punishment are a means to control society and crimes committed that disrupt it. Our conceptualizations, perceptions and understandings about death vary as does the United States and its demographics.

ASSIMILATION

Today, the classic theory of assimilation has been challenged and does not capture the entire immigrant experience as scholars Richard D. Alba and Victor Nee have written about. Assimilation is a process that describes the trajectory of ethnic groups from Europe and not from other parts of the world, thus it is exclusive rather than inclusive. Classic assimilation theory describes how immigrants adapt in a new environment when they have moved from their country of origin. In classic assimilation theory, ethnic cultural origins are not preserved because ethnic groups are expected to unlearn their culture in order to be fully accepted into the host society (Alba and Nee 1997).

Assimilation has immense consequences and impacts. The underpinnings of classic assimilation theory are ideological and ethnocentric, “progressive and irreversible” (Alba and Nee 1997:828). Scholars have also criticized Park for portraying assimilation as the unavoidable outcome among people in a multiethnic society, implicated in his stages of assimilation (Alba and Nee 1997). Classic assimilation theory is a prescriptive theory rather a descriptive theory. In the US, immigrants should participate in assimilation, at least if they hope to succeed. Alba’s (1995) description of assimilation theory is that it is a voluntary, albeit unconscious, process in which a series of small, individual decisions build up to larger decisions, rather than a process imposed on immigrants. Others have criticized assimilation theory for applying primarily to European immigrants at the turn of the 20th century, without attention to the very distinct circumstances faced by non-European immigrants (Blauner
1972). However, classic assimilation theory is an important foundation to understand the development of sociological thought about what happens to immigrants when they settle in a new geographic location.

Some of the earliest work on assimilation comes from sociologist and founder of the Chicago School of Sociology Robert Ezra Park. According to Park, assimilation is a process of socialization (Park 1950). Assimilation is a theory that describes an immigrant’s processes in the adoption of the new host society’s culture (Park 1950). It can be defined as “to compare,” “make like,” to take up and incorporate,” or “like-mindedness” (Park 1950:207). Park borrowed the term from the medical sciences (physiology) (Park 1950). Assimilation in physiology describes the process of nutrition where the body decides which nutrients are chosen to assist the growth of cells and which are nutrients are rejected because of the lack of contribution it has to the cell (Park 1950). Park says: “by a process of nutrition, somewhat similar to the physiological one, we may conceive alien peoples to be incorporated with, made a part of, the community or state” (1950:209). Assimilation happens “spontaneously” (Park 1950:204) through the acquisition of the dominant society’s language, behavior and characteristic habits, as does the selection process the body chooses to assist in cell growth in the body (Park 1950).

According to Park, assimilation can be applied to all ethnic groups, not just those who move to the United States (Park 1950). But ethnic whites have a higher acceptance as first class citizens because of their skin color (Park 1950:206, 208). Park argues that groups who assimilate are secondary citizens; in particular, “he is not, of course, a citizen, although he is not entirely without rights. But he has got into some sort of practical working relations with the group which he belongs” (1950:207). A huge barrier for people of color, such as the Japanese, Africans, or Mexicans is the color of their skin compared to ethnic Europeans such as the Italians, Slavs or Armenians whose skin color allows them to be “indistinguishable” (Park 1950:208). Furthermore, the Japanese are as capable as the Italians, Slavs and Armenians but the “trouble” is the “Jap” is not the right color (Park 1950:209). The same is said of the African Americans (Park 1950:209). White ethnic groups then, become indistinguishable from the majority (Marger 2009; Park 1950).

Assimilation is a one way process that happens gradually over time. Park (1950) states four things that always happen when groups of different races come into contact with
each other: competition, conflict, accommodation, and assimilation. First, groups will come into contact with each other through migration (often in search for economic gains), which leads to competition in new groups who are trying to adapt to their new environment are looking for a way to survive and work (Park 1950). Park believes that there is a “natural” order which all persons in society perform one function or another that stabilizes society (1950:41). This functionalism applies to every part of society “from the family to the nation” (1950:41). Park uses an example of the plant and animal communities to illustrate how competition arises between groups that live in the same community. Park states: “What characterizes this economy is a division of labor and an unconscious co-operation of competing organisms. Wherever in nature competition of the struggle for existence brings about a stable organization among competing individuals, it is because they have achieved in some form or another a division of labor and some form of conscious or unconscious cooperation. In such case the competing species or individual, each occupying the particular niche in which it fits, will have created an environment in which all can live together under conditions where each could not live separately” (1950:41). Park states man’s relation to other men is symbiotic (1950). There is the need for humans to find a way to survive, for needs such as shelter, food and water, but this “natural” order Park speaks of does not exist organically in all societies. In America, this “natural” order evolved with her beginnings and the development of capitalism and industrialization.

As ethnic groups try to maintain their culture in a new environment, and with the institutions of the family and religion working to instill morals and values in the individual, conflict arises between groups that are different. Here begins the struggle with preserving their culture in what Park (1950) calls the “little world” of the family against the infiltration of the new cultural world they are exposed in the “great world” of business and politics (Park 1950:116). This conflict comes from the personal self that is struggling with the divide between their cultural heritage and the new cultural they are living in and being exposed to. Accommodation results after this conflict when the groups find a way to live together through compromise. Finally, assimilation occurs where ethnic groups becomes similar to the majority group.

Park states when assimilation is studied, it is often through individualistic groups that interact on a secondary and indirect basis (1950). Assimilation resulted from Park’s work on
race relations (1924) which assimilation is the last process which a person or group would fully immerse themselves in the majority group’s culture. Under the study of race and race theory, there are two paradigms: race relations and racial oppression. Assimilation falls under the study of race and ethnic relations. Race relations is essentially “relations of conflict” (Marger 2009:80), which describes what happens when groups in a multiethnic society come live together. Park states race relations “are the relations existing between peoples distinguished by marks of racial descent, particularly when these racial differences enter into the consciousness of the individuals and groups so distinguished, and by doing so determine in each case the individual’s conception of himself as well as his status in the community” (1950:8).

Stephen Steinberg defines race relations in his own terms as the “practice of objective social science but whose knowledge claims inescapably have moral consequences, either in subverting racism, or alternatively, providing scientific legitimation for the prevailing racial order” (2007:9). Scholars in the race relations school believe that antagonisms between groups will arise naturally due to their indifference (Marger 2009). Race relations obscures the nature of the relationship between groups in ambiguity, eludes the issue of power to attitudes, implies mutuality between the multiethnic groups, reverts the attention to superficial aspects of the racial dyad, and pretends this innocent ideology exists because it is allied with the status quo. Steinberg (2007) states the race relations paradigm continues to be “recited like a catechism by generations of sociologists on doctoral exams, oblivious to its ideological underpinnings” (51).

Within race relations, there are two theoretical models. One looks at patterns that describe how multiethnic groups interact (Barth and Noel, 1972; Burkey, 1978; Marden and Meyer, 1978) or “cycles of relations through which such societies presumably pass (Marger 2009:81):” intermingle and become the same or they remain segregated. Simply put, ethnic groups either remain distinct and segregated from the dominant group, defined as pluralism, or blend together with the dominant group, which is assimilation (Marger 2009).

There are criticisms of Park’s assimilation theory. Adaptation is not as straightforward as he believed nor are the stages complete. Park’s theory is not applicable to all ethnic groups: he did not consider non-white immigrant group’s experiences in living in America (Marger 2009; Omi and Winant 1994). Instead of seeing the different ethnic groups
as being marginalized, Park believed they should assimilate (Omi and Winant 1994). A culturally homogenous society does not mean that groups will no longer face discrimination, nor equally distribute wealth, power and prestige (Marger 2009). Park believed that interethnic contact will produce a positive outcome, but Barth and Noel (1972) suggest the opposite. Exclusion, pluralism and continued ethnic stratification are all outcomes of interethnic contact that do not lead groups to assimilate. Park also does not consider how groups can reject assimilation and revert back to their traditional culture, or return to the earlier stages of assimilation (Barth and Noel, 1972; Berry and Tischler, 1978; Marger 2009; Omi and Winant 1994).

Park’s theory on assimilation has become a foundation for others who have studied the theory. Milton M. Gordon further developed Park’s theory and believed assimilation was a more complex, less straightforward process than Park suggests. According to Gordon, the stages of assimilation, listed from high intensity to low, are cultural assimilation (acculturation), structural assimilation, marital assimilation, identification assimilation, attitude assimilation, behavior assimilation, and civic assimilation. Some groups may choose to adopt some aspects of their host society, while choosing to hold on to some traditional aspects of their own culture. They also may be blocked from assimilation by prejudice and discrimination. Gordon’s seven steps of assimilation are listed in Table 1 (Gordon 1964).

Cultural assimilation, according to Gordon, was essentially conforming to Anglo-Saxon culture (1964). Minority groups learned the English language, food, political beliefs, values and norms, holidays, and so forth. Gordon notes cultural assimilation usually happens first but does not necessarily lead to the other steps of assimilation, or vice versa (1964:158). For example, Marger (2009) states how African Americans have assimilated culturally, but they are not assimilated at the structural level. Thus, groups can be culturally assimilated for Gordon and remain segregated in other parts of their lives.

Structural assimilation occurs where groups or individuals participate in the host society’s schools, neighborhoods, organizations and clubs. Assimilating structurally is central to achieving the other steps of assimilation. Gordon states that once structural assimilation occurs, marital assimilation, identificational assimilation, attitude and behavioral assimilation will occur naturally (1964:81).
Table 1. Milton M. Gordon’s Seven Stages of Assimilation

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Stage</th>
<th>Characteristic</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Cultural or behavioral assimilation</td>
<td>Change of cultural patterns to those of the host society</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>(acculturation)</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Structural assimilation</td>
<td>Large-scale entrance into cliques, clubs, and institutions of host society on primary group level</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Marital assimilation (amalgamation)</td>
<td>Large-scale intermarriage</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Identification assimilation</td>
<td>Development of sense of peoplehood based exclusively on host society</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Attitude receptional assimilation</td>
<td>Absence of prejudice</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Behavior receptional assimilation</td>
<td>Absence of discrimination</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Civic assimilation</td>
<td>Absence of value and power conflict</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Gordon, like Park, has received criticism for parts of his theory. Marger (2009) argues Gordon does not consider assimilation at the structural level in regards to secondary groups, only looking at assimilation from the primary group perspective. Gordon implies that if minority groups fail to enter into primary relations with the dominant group, its “because the dominant group has held them out” (Marger 2009:89). Marger (2009) states social segregation may be at fault, not necessarily entirely due to the dominant group’s rejection.

Today, there are two main criticisms of assimilation theory. First, assimilation is a one-directional process where immigrant groups are expected to adopt Anglo-Saxon culture. Second, assimilation theory is criticized for not taking into account particular obstacles faced by non-white immigrants. On the other hand, other “non-assimilationist” theories risk “exclusionist” conclusions that portray immigrant experience in a pessimistic light where things such as structural changes may prevent the immigrant group from assimilating (Bean and Stevens 2004).

Alba and Nee believe that the tenets of assimilation theory “are not necessarily assimilationist in their underlying assumptions” (Bean and Stevens 2004:404). Alba and Nee (2003) conclude that the community and the context, the individual and institutional factors
all determine the constraints and incentives of assimilation processes. Assimilation is not uni-directional but varies from group to group. Furthermore, Alba and Nee state “actors make choices according to their perceptions of costs and benefits embedded in the institutional environment” (Beans and Stevens 2004:405).

Assimilation occurs as a consequence of immigrants working towards goals the society at large adopts, such pursuits as education, employment, and shelter. Bean and Stevens (2004) argue that different immigrant groups have access to varying degrees of human and social capital, which is linked to the ways immigrant groups go about attaining the larger goals. As the ways immigrants access their resources vary, so does the “institutional mechanism, which include the monitoring and enforcement of formal rules of the state,” and this “can determine whether the proximate causes promote assimilation or not” (Bean and Stevens 2004:405).

ASSIMILATION AND FUNERAL PRACTICES

There is some literature on ethnic funerals (Malarney 1996; Oxfeld 2004; Rappoport 2004; Wong 1998; Yoder 1986). Albon (1970) and Hill (1992) have looked at immigrant groups and how their traditional funeral practices have changed since living in a new homeland. To date, I have not found current literature on traditional Southeast Asian and contemporary Southeast Asian funerals in America and how they have changed and continued in their new home. The Samoans in the US and the Chinese in Chiang Mai, Thailand are two groups that have moved from their homeland and modified their funeral practices due to this immigration. Each case is different, but common themes arise.

Geographic Location and Proximity to Community Members

Many Samoans who have come from American Samoa reside on the West Coast, mainly concentrated in San Diego, Oceanside, San Francisco Bay area and Los Angeles (Albon 1970). Many traditional cultural practices have carried over from American Samoa such as the funeral practice. The Samoan traditional funeral practice itself has changed throughout time (Albon 1970). Albon’s research investigates the way the Samoan community has practiced their funeral in an urban setting compared to the contemporary Samoan funeral in American Samoa.
As Samoans in the US have adjusted to their new home, they have modified the traditional funeral practice. The funeral practices are now centered on the church and mortuary rather than in the home (Albon 1970). This occurred because of the urban settings in which Samoans lived in the US, compared to their country of origin. In American Samoa, the family property would have a house plus additional surrounding land that better serves more guests. The home is central to all funeral activities instead of the mortuary and the church. In the city, houses are more likely to be close together and with limited space. In American Samoa, the funeral happens within 24 hours unless the family is awaiting relatives from the mainland or Hawaii. Samoans in the US, however, do not have the funeral within 24 hours. Relatives and friends live further from each other and must take time to travel to the funeral location. Once a person dies, calls and telegrams are made to extended family members who live further away from the deceased. Donations from those who cannot attend are sent with the few who go on behalf of long distance family members, friends and other community members.

Samoans in the US prefer to be buried next to other Samoans, since they are no longer buried on the family property as would be the case in American Samoa. The Samoan churches hold large plots in the cemetery, which are divided based on Christian denomination, while others have chosen burial sites neighboring other Samoans in the cemetery. The reception site for Samoan funerals in the US have centered on the church or a reception hall. This is partly due again, to the size of the urban home and also to the economic status of the family of the deceased.

The Thais have welcomed the Chinese in their country; they have created a piece of China right in Thailand’s backyard in Thailand’s second largest city, Chiang Mai (Hill 1992). In Hill’s terms, the Chinese in Thailand are “regarded as the “success story” of assimilation in Southeast Asia” (1992:316). Just like in China, the Chinese in Chiang Mai have set up their stores along the city streets, brought their Chinese deities, and their funeral practices (Hill 1992). The Chinese also represent another ethnic group that has moved from their homeland and have adopted their cultural practices due to their new living environment. The Chinese in Thailand hold their services at the temple or wat, since Thailand is primarily a Buddhist nation. The Chinese used one particular temple because of donations made by a prominent Chinese man and it was close to the Chinese population and shops. Changing the
funeral location to the temple is an example of an adaptation of their funeral practice because of the new environment the Chinese live in. The temple is viewed as a positive space that their group can benefit from.

**New Cultural Influences**

The contemporary Samoan funeral typically takes place within a twenty-four hour period, but the urban US Samoan funeral may not take place for several days (Albon 1970). American Samoa and the United States both have mortuaries that can preserve the body for a longer periods but embalming is not traditionally practiced in American Samoa. Samoans have adopted the American practice of embalming even though there are other methods available such as refrigeration that helps preserve the body.

The church has become the central location for Samoans in the US not only for funerals, but for their social life (Albon 1970). The church has become “the institution that supports and encourages and is itself supported and encouraged by the maintenance of traditional Samoan customs” (Albon 1970:219). In American Samoa, there was the “traditional village district, and island hierarchies of family chiefs, the church and its officials fill a structural vacuum” (Albon 1970:219). However, in the US, large Samoan enclaves are located in different parts of the United States that are not in close proximity as would be the case in American Samoa and Samoa.

There was also a change in the traditional burying practice among the deceased Samoans living in the US. Samoans in the US are buried in a Samoan cemetery area, compared to American Samoa where the deceased is buried on family property. Typically in American Samoa, the burial plot is prepared by the family. In the US, Samoans pay the mortuary to do this for them. This is also an example of the incorporation of the cultural Western practice. However, the development of being buried with other Samoans in the US in the cemetery shows the maintenance of Samoan culture even in the afterlife (Albon 1970).

Guests and mourners are invited to a reception at a reception site. In American Samoa, the reception site has three locations: persons related to the family and who have conducted the funeral services (*matai*, or chief) dine at the family house, *matai* not related to the family are assigned to another house for their meal, and other remaining guests are served outside. In the contemporary US funeral, the reception might take place at the church if the
food is made by family and church members or at a restaurant hall if the dinner is catered. American food is also served along with traditional Samoan food. The reception signifies the end of the funeral service (Albon 1970).

The Chinese in Chiang Mai, Thailand have incorporated some aspects of Thai funeral customs to their funeral practices. Incorporating the Thai monks to chant at their funeral service is another example of assimilating to Thai funeral practices. The Chinese have adopted the convention where the family sons “become Buddhist novices for the several-day period of the funeral, a merit-making practice of sons on behalf of the deceased parent” (Hill 1992:324). The Thai monks are fed each day during the funeral service at noon, adhering to the Thai’s religious funeral culture. The Chinese have adopted these Thai funeral customs because they believe it does a good deed for the deceased, enhances their social status in the community, or were told to do so by the Chinese religious specialist. The Chinese being surrounded by Thai culture see Thai funeral practices as beneficial to the deceased, so they too decided to add it to their funeral practice (Hill 1992).

**Modifications out of Necessity and New Cultural Logistical Barriers**

Once the death is announced, money collection for the Samoan funeral in the US begins. Everyone, including “parents, grandparents, children, siblings, aunts, uncles, and cousins of the deceased, the adopted kin within these categories, and the affines of all of these- are expected to contribute money from their respective households to the households of the deceased” (Albon 1970:210). The relatives that are closer to the deceased are expected to contribute more money than the rest, ranging from one hundred to two hundred dollars. In American Samoa, the traditional practice is that the family will come together and decide who will donate what items to the service. However, the urban Samoan funeral requires everyone to donate money. This practice has changed because of the high costs of US funerals and the new emphasis on money that is highly valued over the display of food among Samoans living in the US. In American Samoa, on the other hand, the need for money is minimal and more emphasis is on food donations. Any food left over was returned to the donor. Unlike funerals in American Samoa, money that is left over from the funeral is divided up among the “immediate family and bilateral kin” (Albon 1970:212), because of the high costs of living in the United States. There is a cultural difference on the issue of money
where it seems Samoans living in the US see money as a sign of prosperity and high social status compared to Samoans in American Samoa who do not value money in the same way (Albon 1970).

The traditional custom of donating old fine mats at Samoan funerals and weddings have changed in the US. The mats are highly prized because they carefully crafted from the best pandanus and hold sentimental value as some have been passed down from family to family. The mats are circulated carefully in the US because of the limited numbers. Mats also cannot be taken out of American Samoa because of a declaration that was made in 1969 and is also due to their limited numbers of mats. In Samoa, mats are generally distributed between various matai and their family members when funerals and weddings take place. In the US, however, the mats are returned to the person that it belongs to because it is also difficult to retrieve mats for the funeral and as stated above, mats hold great sentimental family value. The mats are tagged with the owner’s name to ensure return to its rightful owner (Albon 1970).

**CONCLUSION**

Death has been transformed from the traditional to modern societies. As technological advances and society evolves, so does our culture. How has modernity organized the culture of death and dying and the division between life and death? Some say that the US continues to view death as a taboo and denies that it exists. This view suggests the US is a homogenous society, but the history of the US proves not, thus “omitting the experience of other cultures” (Noys 2005:11).

Park and Gordon saw what was happening in society as immigrant groups from around the world that came to America. Ethnic groups are intermarrying, adopting some forms (or all) of Western culture, have a taste for Western food, but ethnic groups should not have to feel forced to assimilate. The problem with assimilation along with its criticisms is that different ethnic groups should not be expected to assimilate to their new culture. Why not expect that the various ethnic groups have the right to choose for themselves if they assimilate? Humans continue to evolve as circumstances and times change, embracing old traditions and creating new ones as well. The history of the US is a history of immigration from various cultures, and each culture should be respected.
The cases of the Samoans in the US and the Chinese in Chiang Mai, Thailand show how assimilation is different in various contexts and between various ethnic groups. The Chinese have adapted their funeral practices and choose to incorporate pieces of the Thai funeral practice. Thailand, compared to America, is not as industrialized, less developed, and is essentially categorized as a third world country. Thailand has not been able to independently stand on its own economically; therefore unable to exercise a large political influence like America. Thailand is still playing catch up compared to the US, Europe and other nations who have more economic power, political influence, government force, and national independence on the worldwide front. Thailand thus, is less concerned with regulations of their funeral practices among the Chinese in Chiang Mai, Thailand. The Chinese are also seen as a “success story” of assimilation in Thailand who has been able to incorporate into Thai society and have been welcomed by the Thai people.

Samoans in America represent a part of the minority group. Similar to many ethnic minority groups in the US, Samoans have a different (darker) color than the white majority and face difficulties in educational and economic attainments (Albon 1971). They moved to the US, a nation where there are more rules and regulations, technological advances, and where federal and state government mandate institutions in society. The Samoans in the US have changed their funeral practice because of modernity and feeling they needed to adopt Western funeral practices. Here arises the imposition of the Western culture of dying because of its political dominance (Noys 2005), as stated earlier. Thailand, on the other hand, is still playing catch up compared to the US, Europe and other nations who have more economic power, political influence, government force, and national independence on the worldwide front.

The adaptations and modifications within the traditional funeral has been a result of necessity and changes in their geographical location. Samoans in the US who live in urban and metropolitan settings live in neighborhoods where they live in close proximity to their neighbor, but will still not know them well or at all. Culturally, America became a society where this is the norm because of its individualistic nature. In American Samoa they are not separated because of the existence of close knit communities and collective society. The church became the central location for funerals because of the nonexistent “traditional village” (Albon 1970:219).
The Chinese set up their own piece of China in Chiang Mai, yet incorporated Thai funeral practices they felt would help the deceased get to heaven. The Chinese use the Thai temples for funerals, social gatherings and other Chinese popular rituals (Hill 1992). Hill reports that the Chinese adoptions of Thai funeral customs of the sons of the deceased becoming Buddhist novices, having the Buddhist monks chant in their funeral ceremonies, and use Thai temples because the Chinese believe this will enhance their “individual status and prestige” (Hill 1992:325), while another argument holds that the Chinese have incorporated Thai customs because they believe it will only do good for the dead (Hill 1992). The Chinese have been influenced by these Thai customs because it surrounds them, and they see as beneficial to themselves and their dead.

Although the Chinese in Thailand and the Samoans in the US have adapted and modified their funeral practices, at the heart of their funeral practices is their traditional culture. The Samoan funeral has a matai that leads the funeral service, circulates the traditional custom of mats, holds a reception that signifies the end of the funeral service, donate money to help out the deceased and their family with funeral costs and continues the emphasis on community. The Chinese in Thailand have continued to maintain much of their funeral practices and culture since their migration to Thailand. The Chinese still fear funerals and deaths because they believe bad luck is lingering nearby as they did in China. Their funerals are still lead by literate Chinese men who are knowledgeable on Chinese funerals and specialize only in funeral customs. In Thailand, the Chinese men who officiates the funerals are still feared because of their association with death and funerals. The Chinese in Thailand continue to wear traditional funeral clothing, wearing “roughly cut mourning clothes of unbleached muslin or hemp” (Hill 1992:318). The Chinese also continue to perform ceremonies such as the “walk over the bridge” to help the deceased travel into the underworld (Hill 1992).

Theoretically, the success of Chinese assimilation in Thailand could be related to the pan-ethnic identity between the two. The Samoans in the US, however, are drastically different from the dominate society even though Christianity links the two groups together. For these two cases, the institutional structure of the government influenced the degree of assimilation. The Samoans in the US incorporated more of the dominant culture’s practices due to the degree which the funeral industry has set rules and regulations and cultural
practices for death and dying through the monitoring at the institutional state and local level. The high regard for the chiefs in the Samoan community in the US has had a large impact on the way the Samoan funeral is held in the US. Important cultural funeral practices are still practiced, while other cultural funeral practices were adopted in their new environment, while still maintaining their cultural identity in the US through the practice of burials in the cemetery next to other Samoans.

I predict that the Lao-Cambodians will face a similar fate as the Samoans in the US. Characteristically, both groups share many commonalities: they are culturally and physically distinct, have large families and generally a low socio-economic status, live in large urban ethnic enclaves, travel within their own social ethnic groups, live in similar geographic locations and distances to others of their own ethnic group, come from traditional, collective societies and have primarily remain so since their immigration, and maintain their own sub society which is guided by a community leader. The Lao-Cambodians, like the Samoans in the US, would conform under societal pressure in order not to appear too different and in some ways, more similar to the dominant culture by remaining a non-threatening ethnic group. The main focus in the case of the Lao-Cambodians will be on the reasons why some aspects of their traditional funeral practices of changed, how some have evolved, and the impacts and influences on changes to their funeral practices.
CHAPTER 3

METHODOLOGY

There are different factors that shape our views about death. Various factors affect how an immigrants deal with living in a new society. The qualitative study will allow for detailed information about the historical, comparative and theoretical investigation of traditional Lao funeral practices in addition to exploring the personal histories and experiences of study participants.

SAMPLE

The Lao population was the target group. The Lao-Cambodians in Southern California represent a unique group because of their history. Ethnically, they are Lao but they can also identify with the Khmer culture because they were born and raised in Cambodia. In Lao, they refer to themselves as kon yna, or Lao-Cambodians. The population I recruited from survived the genocide by the Khmer Rouge in Cambodia in 1975. The Lao were the target group for this research because of the small amount of research that has been conducted about the Lao’s funeral practices.

I contacted the Lao-Cambodian community in Southern California through snowball sampling. As I am a part of this community, I had access to the Lao in Southern California. I made contacts with people who are known to conduct funeral practices in the community in addition to people who work closely with the head Buddhist monk at temples. A sample of twenty people participated in the study. Two participants were Buddhist monks of Thai descent who served as Buddhist monks to the local temple. One participant is ethnically Cambodian but had arranged a funeral for her father-in-law that was Lao-Cambodian. She was also the only one that was born in the US.

This study included Lao ages eighteen and over. It was highly unlikely that those younger than eighteen have carried out funeral rites. They are not considered adults, and would not legally be able to make decisions regarding funeral rites. The participants’ age group ranged from 28 years old to 81 years old. The youngest participant, who was 28 years
was born in the US, was Cambodian American but had arranged the funeral for her father-in-law who was Lao-Cambodian. The second youngest who was 33 years old, was born in Thailand but arrived in America at 12 months old, and is also Lao-Cambodian. The two monks were Thai and born in Thailand, while the other 16 participants were all Lao-Cambodian born in Battambang, Cambodia. The two youngest participants did not know how the traditional Lao-Cambodian funeral was practiced in Cambodia. A list for all the participants is detailed in Table 2.

A majority of the face to face interviews were conducted at the participant’s home. One interview was conducted at my home, one at a coffee shop and the two conducted with the Buddhist monks were conducted at the temple. All participants were Buddhists, ten males and ten females. Only one informant arranged a funeral for someone that converted to Christianity upon their arrival to the US, but also continued Buddhist practices as well. The funeral arranged by the informant resulted in mainly a Buddhist funeral ceremony, with some Christianity intermingled in. In an unfortunate event, one of my participants passed after I interviewed her. I also observed her funeral as part of my participant observations.

Initially, I intended to recruit funeral directors in the Southern California area who have assisted the Southeast Asian but my calls and visits to the mortuary went unanswered. Also, I did not anticipate recruiting the Buddhist monks in the Southeast Asian community to participate in the study, but I soon saw that they could answer many questions that those who have officiated or arranged a funeral for someone could not answer. Their participation in the study later became very significant in figuring out why the Lao-Cambodians practiced certain funeral rituals.

**DATA COLLECTION**

The participants had to be 18 years or older, have arranged a funeral for someone, have officiated a funeral, or currently or formerly been a funeral director. The participants had to either be Lao, Cambodian, Thai or of another ethnic group. Only participants who had knowledge about funeral rites, had been involved in carrying out funeral practices, or played a role in conducting the funeral practices for Southeast Asians were considered for the in-depth face to face interviews. Potential participants had to fit the criteria in order to participate in the study. Once they fit the criteria (see Appendix A), they were asked to be a
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Participant</th>
<th>Age</th>
<th>Sex</th>
<th>Birthplace</th>
<th>Ethnicity</th>
<th>Religion</th>
<th>Participant Role</th>
<th>Funeral Arranged for</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1</td>
<td>60</td>
<td>F</td>
<td>Cambodia</td>
<td>Lao</td>
<td>Buddhist</td>
<td>Family member</td>
<td>Son</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2</td>
<td>76</td>
<td>M</td>
<td>Cambodia</td>
<td>Lao</td>
<td>Buddhist</td>
<td>Community leader</td>
<td>Est. 20 people</td>
</tr>
<tr>
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<td>51</td>
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<td>Lao</td>
<td>Buddhist</td>
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part of the study. If the participant agreed, an interview time and date was set. Participants who fit the criteria and later seemed reluctant to participate in the interviews were not pursued any further. The interviews (see Appendix B and Appendix C) took place at the participant’s home in a room where it was quiet and there was no interruption. Other ethnic groups that may have similar experiences in continuing their traditional funeral practice in a new homeland. No matter how a society deals with death or views death, one cannot imagine the day to day experiences individuals deal with the reality of death behind closed doors. Some participants were not as willing to share or perhaps reveal this part of their life for various reasons, thus possibly limiting some responses during the interview.

The face to face interviews were taped recorded and transcribed. The interviews were conducted in either Lao or English, depending on the language the participant spoke or preferred. All the transcribed interviews were stored on a zip drive and locked up in a file cabinet for protection of the participants. The recruitment took place at temples, large community gatherings and Lao, Cambodian and Thai ethnic enclaves in Southern California. Community members who also had a deceased family member were asked if they knew of others who had deceased family members that would be interested in participating the study.

Participant observations were also conducted at four funerals and funeral observances that occurred during my research. During the funeral observations, I went to the funeral house as many days my schedule could allow. For three of my four funeral observations, I attended the funeral observance at the deceased’s home when the death of the deceased was first announced, I went at least twice to the deceased’s home after the first visit, and to the deceased’s funeral service. Of the three, I was also able to observe one wake (which took place a day before the funeral service) for the deceased where the close relatives and friends of the deceased became novice monks. For the fourth funeral observation, I was only able to attend the deceased’s home after their death was announced and before the funeral service took place.

**DATA ANALYSIS**

I developed a section that presents themes found from the face to face interviewing. Data was analyzed by looking at traditional Lao-Cambodian funerals and comparing what
changes have occurred in the Lao-Cambodian funerals taking place in America. After all the interviews were transcribed, they were analyzed to see what recurring themes emerged.

**LIMITATIONS**

There were some limitations to this study. The sample was comprised only of 20 participants in the study. Their adapted funeral practices might not be the same as Lao who were born in Laos, or who reside in other areas of the United States and worldwide. The sample size may not be large enough, but the work could set foundations for similar studies to be conducted with a larger sample size in the future. In addition, the study focused only on Lao and did not include and did not include other ethnic groups that may have similar experiences in continuing their traditional funeral practice in a new homeland. Some participants were not as willing to share or perhaps reveal this part of their life for various reasons, thus possibly limiting some responses during the interview.
CHAPTER 4

FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

The traditional Lao-Cambodian funeral in the US has undergone changes and modifications. The Lao-Cambodian funeral is detailed and guided by Theravada Buddhism and animism. In Lao, the funeral is referred to as a boun, which can have multiple meanings, depending on the context of the use. A boun is generally described as an observance to make merit, whether it is for purposes such as a funeral, or the observance of the Thai, Lao or Cambodian New Year’s. Boun are observances that celebrated for various reasons—but at the foundations the purpose is making merit towards something or for someone (you or someone else). Ricky², 54, explained his view on what boun is:

Boun, you can do it for yourself. Boun is like, good deeds. You must do good deeds. The more you do boun for others, the more you get it. Boun is not like how you just see it. Boun is like a light, a circuit. If we do boun for them, they will get it. You have to keep it burning or working. We do boun for ourselves so we can also get to heaven. Everything we do, the deceased can also get boun too and receive it from our merits. You put money and money, if you don’t have money, you cash it. It’s like people who get lotto, donated a lot of money prior or in their previous life, they did a lot of boun for them to win the lotto. When we buy lotto, and we don’t get it, or donate to other boun it’s because we haven’t done enough good deeds.

The funeral is divided into a few key components. First and foremost, the family announces the death of the deceased and begins arranging the funeral. After this announcement is made, the family begins planning for the rituals and funeral practices. Food is also a very important part of the funeral for the guests, the Buddhist monks and the deceased. Donations are made by the Lao-Cambodian community which helps pay for the expenses of the funeral. After the donations, the Buddhist monks also come and pray for the deceased at the home (before the funeral service), at the funeral service and at the burial. Lastly, the caskets, and burial, or cremation are arranged for the deceased. For this collective community, through their funeral practices, death is a reality that is not seen as taboo nor denied but rather something that will happen to everyone and that is openly

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² All names have been changed to protect the anonymity of the participants of the study.
discussed. We shall first explore how the arrangement of the funeral and the death announcement process begins.

**THE LAO-CAMBODIAN BOUN (INFORMING THE FAMILY OF THE DEATH AND ARRANGING THE FUNERAL)**

In this section, the traditional way of informing the family of death and funeral arrangements will be detailed, followed by the changes that have occurred since the Lao-Cambodian arrival to the United States. Subsequently, reasons for modifications of informing the family of the death and funeral arrangement practices will be discussed.

**Traditional**

In Cambodia, once a death occurred, the family informed the immediate relatives and a few friends in person. The news then circulated by word of mouth throughout the village. The community came to the house of the deceased at all times of day until the final funeral procession. No invitation was needed to specify when the community could come to the home of the deceased. The family began arrangements for the funeral immediately by contacting the Buddhist monks and informing them of the death. In Cambodia, the funeral arrangements were taken care of by the family. The Lao-Cambodian funeral in the US, on the other hand, takes quite a bit more involvement by three parties.

**Modifications in the US**

Once a death occurs in the Lao-Cambodian community in the US, phone calls are made out to the immediate family. The news then circulates by word of mouth through the community. If the deceased has relatives in a different state or country, the family makes a call to the relatives. The distant family contacted informs other family and friends in the area, and the news circulates by word of mouth. Betty, 65, says:

Back in Cambodia we just told family, who usually lived by each other. We didn’t have phones either. In America, we just told a few people and they would relay the message to others. When people find out that someone has died, they just automatically come over. You don’t have to call and tell people like when it’s a wedding. People talk to each other and may say, so and so has passed away, and the news eventually gets around like that. It doesn’t matter if you don’t get an invitation to a funeral; everyone just comes unlike a wedding. With Cambodians and Thais it is different.
The community leaders are also contacted, informing them of the death and the need for their guidance. The family consults with the community leader about what needs to be done to begin the funeral arrangements.

The family of the deceased also contacts a funeral home and begins planning the Western funeral practices with a funeral director. While planning the Western funeral part, the family of the deceased is usually accompanied by another family member who speaks proficient English and serves as a translator between the family and the funeral director. The family of the deceased and the funeral director begin arrangements for the caring of the deceased’s body, the purchase of flower arrangements, how the deceased will be buried and where, and when and where the service will be held.

**Reasons for Modification**

Life in Cambodia was very traditional and rural. The family members did not live far from each other because they typically lived in their own houses if they had their own family units. The community did not need to look to a community leader for help in making the funeral arrangements. Everyone in the community knew how to arrange a funeral, and they all relied on each other for help in all aspects of the funeral. The Khmer government did not impose rules, regulations or sanctions for the funeral. There was no funeral industry in Cambodia at that time.

The Lao-Cambodians escaped the Khmer Rouge, in doing so they became separated. Some ended up staying in the refugee camps and returned back to Cambodia, while others were given options of where they wanted to go. Some went to the US, others to Europe, and still others to Canada. Life and settlement in the US, Europe and Canada meant life lived in the modern, metropolitan, and urban environment. The Lao-Cambodian community that settled in each of the three areas had to figure out their new environments and living situations. They had to relearn everything they knew before and accommodate to their new environment. The Lao-Cambodian community lived farther from each other, unlike life in the village in Cambodia where everyone lived within walking distance of each other. Even if they settled in the same region or state, the Lao-Cambodian community still lived a considerable distance apart, compared to living within walking distance of each other. For example, many Southeast Asians live in California, but northern California and southern
California are quite far. Some families may have also settled in a certain city after their immigration, and moved to a different state in search of employment stability in another state. The Lao community that lives abroad cannot easily attend people’s funerals as they would have been able to in Cambodia. The modern telephone was the one thing the community could use to keep in contact and communicate with each other, and once someone heard of the news, then the spread of the news snowballed from one person to the next.

The community leaders play a very important role in the Lao-Cambodian funeral in the US. When the Lao-Cambodian community first arrived and settled in the US in the 1980s, there were many community leaders in Long Beach, San Bernardino, and San Diego. But as time went on, they aged, some got sick and passed away; now there are only a few to serve as community leaders. The community leader is always an older Buddhist layperson, and very knowledgeable about the religion. They are always men because women are not allowed to be near Buddhist monks. When a funeral or any sort of observance is to be held, the families having the observances always call on the community leader for their assistance. The community leaders arrange within their group to make sure there is always a leader at the observance. They hold the importance of the collective community in high regard and are always there to help the community.

The adoption the Western funeral practice and mergence with the Lao-Cambodian traditional funeral practice has caused confusion among the community in terms of how to carry out their traditional funeral practices in the US. No longer in their homeland, the Lao are not living only in the Lao culture but also living in the Western culture. The family of the deceased works with the funeral director to set up the details for the service and the body, while also consulting with the community leader and making sure the foundations of the Buddhist religious service of the funeral remains central to the funeral. In the Lao-Cambodian and many Asian cultures, the elders are respected and sought out for wisdom, knowledge and advice. Everyone in the community does not know how the funeral customs should be carried out so the community depends highly on the community leader for their guidance and knowledge about what rituals and customs must be followed. One community leader, Luther, 76, responds why we needed a community leader in the US:
In Cambodia, we did not have to do the same things in America. In Cambodia, you did have community leaders but they were not sought after in Cambodia. All you had to do was contact the Buddhist monks to do the funeral. You could not leave the body for days because it would rot. In America, no. Cambodia you could bury the deceased wherever and we did our own cremations. If you need to bury someone here, you need to buy a plot and consult with the right person. You need to see what day is available with both parties. It’s not the same. In Cambodia it’s not difficult. No one owns plots in Cambodia like America. You can cremate wherever you want in Cambodia. But in America, no. You have to follow the laws. They will catch you if you don’t, it’s against their laws.

The adoption of US funeral practices lead to having another party arrange the funeral for them instead of arranging the entire funeral on their own. There are flower arrangements, deciding how to take care of the body, and the purchase of a casket and of various funeral accessories the Lao-Cambodian community incorporated into their funeral practices where traditionally, they would handle the funeral arrangements with the help of the community or build with their own hands.

The Lao-Cambodian community did not need the help of translators as they do in the US with the language barrier. Although the Lao-Cambodian community has lived in the US, Canada and Europe for at least 20 years, the older generation that was born in Cambodia have not learned English like their children who were young when they arrived to the US or were born in the US. The Lao-Cambodians have had to heavily rely on their children and who know how to speak, read and write English for things in their daily lives big and small, and on those who know how to navigate within Western culture. After the death announcement is made, and the family of the deceased begins arranging the funeral, the *boun* immediately takes place.

**The Boun**

In this section, the traditional Lao-Cambodian *boun* will be detailed, followed by the changes that have occurred since the Lao-Cambodian arrival to the United States. Subsequently, reasons for modifications of the *boun* practices will be discussed.

**Traditional**

The *boun* was the time when the community came to visit and pay respects to the deceased and their family until the funeral was over. The *boun* took place immediately
where the deceased lived. This meant that each day leading up to the final funeral service, people came to the house throughout all times of the day (early morning to late night). The community came to show support for the deceased and their family members. When others in the community had an observance or had a death in their family, it was expected that if they came to your boun, you returned the favor and did the same. The saying still goes, “naap tuu gaan,” meaning to hold on to each other. Naap tuu gaan can also mean to respect an elder, teacher, and also family and close friends. In this case, naap tuu gaan means that as a community, you cannot just throw each other away and leave people behind, but you should help each other out and support each other, especially in large, life changing events such as funerals and births. This was very much in line with the 10 Buddhist precepts. By showing up at someone’s boun shows that you care and that you have made an effort to pay respects and hold that person or family in high regards to visit them at a significant time in their life. Some in the community held this in regard even when the opposite party did not give the same regards in return when they had a boun. Naap tuu gaan applied not only to the living but to the deceased as well. This cultural value holds deep to the Lao-Cambodian community that traced back to their history of immigration from Laos to Cambodia. Vothy, 57, reveals the history behind it:

We Lao-Cambodians left home from Laos to live in Cambodia for many years, it’s been about 200 years since we came from Laos to live in Cambodia. The Thai and Lao were fighting, so we had to escape that. We secretly left Laos to go to Cambodia. We didn’t like Thailand fighting and killing us, so we left. Because we left together from Laos, we stayed together in Cambodia. This was also a time for the community to regroup, socialize (see Figure 1), offer their help and find out other happenings occurring at that time. The boun was like having a friend visit you and providing hospitality for them with food, drink, and time spent together, except, for the boun, you provided hospitality for the entire community.

The entire funeral from beginning to end lasted only 2 to 3 days, as the funeral service occurred immediately because of the rate of the body decomposition. Traditionally, the funeral service took place on what the Lao considered a good day. According to Luther, 76:

Certain days you are not supposed to have funerals on what we call bad days. The middle of the month, usually the 15th, you are not supposed to have a funeral. Tuesday you cannot have a funeral (both in Cambodia and the US) because it is considered a hot day. It will warm up the house, the family,
the neighbors, the funeral service- no one will feel good that day, you will feel sick.

Bad days were considered to be on also Tuesdays, Wednesdays and Fridays. Sometimes this was overlooked depending on the rate of decomposition. The funeral service could not take place on the days the Buddhist laypersons went and stayed at the temple where they observed all of the Buddhist precepts with the Buddhist monks. They were referred to the Buddhist day, or \textit{muu wanpaah or sinn}. Sometimes, the practice of having the service on a good day was overlooked because the body decomposition occurred rapidly and had to be buried or cremated because of the smell. Usually, in Laos, people refer to the funeral house as \textit{baan boun}.

The family started by cleaning up the house and the yard before guests would arrive. They would set up areas for food preparation and for guests to be able to socialize. Some guests would begin help with the food, ask what could be done for the \textit{boun}, or some would simply show face and be present during this time. In Cambodia, a small altar was set up for the deceased in the home. The altar consisted of a Buddhist statue and a photo of the deceased if there was one but this was rare. Sometimes a small flower arrangement was put
together, and light was nearby when nightfall arrived. The altar was set up in the living room, usually where the casket was kept in the home. A few items such as pots, pans, clothing, and some rice surrounded the altar for the baangsagoon, which were items that are “given” to the deceased through ritual and prayer of the Buddhist monks.

**Modifications in the US**

In the US, after the death announcement and making funeral arrangements, the family of the deceased begins preparations for other family, friends and the community that will come to the home. The *boun* in the US lasts 7 to 14 days. Furniture in the main areas of the house such as the living room, dining room, or kitchen is moved out of the house. This provides more space for the guests. After all the furniture is removed from the house, the community leader begins setting up the altar for the deceased.

The leader usually puts up a white cloth where the altar will be set up, as well as on the wall where the prayer area is designated for the Buddhist monks. Christmas lights are put up on the backdrop for the altar background and the Buddhist monks’ prayer area. Small, decorative platforms about 5Wx5L are arranged in a triangular shape. After the foundation is set up, a Buddhist statue sits at the top of the altar, surrounded with an abundance of flowers, candles and incense. On the bottom or to the side of the altar is the photo of the deceased, with more candles and incense next to it. Also surrounding the altar are an abundance of items such as a 25 pound bag of rice, monk cloth, toilet paper, and other items for the baangsagoon (see Figure 2).

The family of the deceased also goes shopping for all the supplies (some in large quantities) needed for the *boun*. Items may include forks, spoons, napkins, plates, and various groceries to make food, beverages such as soda, water, food warmers, large pots and pans, aluminum foil, incense, toilet paper, and everything that will be used in preparation for the funeral. Large items such as pots, propane burners, tables, chairs, and tents are usually borrowed from the temple.

**Reasons for Modification**

Many aspects of the funeral changed because of the fact that Lao have many more resources in the US. The Lao in Cambodia did not have to move furniture out of the home because there was very little furniture as they were people with little means. Vothy, 57, says:
No, in Cambodia we didn’t have any sofas or anything, we lived outside the city, in the rural parts. We’d line up and buy pigs and cows together. We didn’t get a lot of money like we do in America. Everyone was really poor. Not everyone has money.

The altar in the US for the deceased is quite plentiful compared to Cambodia. Primarily, the Lao-Cambodians did not have money or access to buy flowers, incense, candles, and lights. They also have access to more stores nearby where they can easily purchase items such as incense, candles, and flowers. In rural Cambodia, there was a paucity of resources and less access to stores, so they used what they had or could find for the altar, or simply did without it. The Lao-Cambodians in the US buy more supplies because they have monetary resources and it is needed for the length of the funeral.

In the US the funeral celebration was longer because people live farther apart, have stricter work schedules and the body can be preserved. The primary reason the funeral lasted 2 to 3 days in Cambodia was because of the quick body decomposition. They did not have a way to refrigerate the body in the tropical, monsoon climate. The community also lived in close proximities to each other and did not have to travel long distances to the funeral. Moreover, their work was not guided by a capitalistic economy. Many Lao-Cambodians in Cambodia were farmers or worked for themselves. They did not have to answer to anyone
but themselves, so they had the freedom to come and go as they needed. Their lives did not revolve around a strict cultural work schedule or work hours. In this sense, the Lao-Cambodians’ life in the US, is opposite of their life in Cambodia. Nathan, 44, states:

Let’s say someone dies Wednesday, you don’t want to do it the coming weekend, but wait till the next weekend. People have to scramble to get plane tickets, call everybody, and ask your boss for vacation, that’s why it’s not the same anymore like where we come from. Back home, when someone dies, they get there as soon as possible because we lived in the village, and we did not have to drive or fly. So it’s different in our country.

Thus, their work comes first and any other activities are planned around their work schedule. Their free time is limited to Saturdays and Sundays, and this is usually when there is a high attendance from the community at the baan boun. In Cambodia, they had more freedom and flexibility to attend the funeral house and funerals were not necessarily held on weekends but within days of the death.

The Lao-Cambodian funeral in the US is also extended because of logistics. Since the Lao-Cambodian funeral adopted the Western practice of having the funeral service at the mortuary, they have to wait for a day the mortuary is available and it must fall on a good day according to Lao-Cambodian tradition. As one participant Ricky said, there is a line of people who died before you who are also waiting for their funeral. The family of the deceased has to negotiate what day and time the funeral service will be. Thus, the funeral can be extended for a full two weeks if there is no day available at the funeral home that is also a good day according to tradition. Once the beginnings of the boun planning takes place, one highly important component to the boun, the food, starts being prepared for the deceased, the Buddhist monks and the community.

FOOD

In this section, the traditional role of food will be detailed, followed by the changes that have occurred since the Lao-Cambodian arrival to the United States. Subsequently, reasons for modifications of the role of food will be discussed.

Traditional

Food was traditionally made each day of the boun until the final funeral procession to feed the deceased’s spirit, the Buddhist monks and the community. The family of the deceased and community make do with what they have at that time, whether it is the
slaughtering of a cow or picking bamboo from the garden. The food was not abundant, but there was enough for everyone to eat. A patriarchal society, the young women were the ones primarily cooking and preparing the dishes. The young men primarily helped with any heavy lifting or preparation of the meats. Since food was made every day until the service was complete, food was being prepped each day.

First, food was made to feed the deceased’s wandering spirit. The spirit of the deceased is fed in the morning and evening, as the whole purpose of the funeral was to help the deceased get to heaven. The spirit of the deceased must be fed as if they were living, because they do not know they are dead until the funeral is over. This was called *taang pawen*. When the food was made, small servings of each dish was put onto small plates and placed on a small serving tray. The tray also had something for the deceased to drink (often to the deceased’s liking) and a candle and incense lit. The food was set outside of the house in a safe area away from foot traffic. The food could not be set inside the home because they are no longer living; therefore they cannot eat with the living. A few of the close family members would say a prayer and call upon the deceased to come and receive the offerings made for them. Holly, 53, says:

> We’re afraid we won’t get to eat. At night, say if I die, you have to put the food outside on a tray. You’ll want to give them the foods they like to eat. You light an incense, call their name and call them to come eat. When they pray, they will call out to the deceased person because you want them to receive the food you made for the monks. They say, the deceased gets to eat this way. They say it is true. The deceased in your family will get to eat.

The food made in the morning was usually prepared in time for the Buddhist monks’ second meal of the day. In particular, the days the Buddhist monks were scheduled to come and pray for the deceased, various women from the community gathered in the morning at the funeral house to help prepare their food. The food had to be ready as soon as the Buddhist monks were done praying because they were limited to eating two times a day; breakfast and lunch both before noon. The food that was set aside for the Buddhist monks to eat could not to be eaten by the laypeople first. It was considered a sin to eat the food made for the Buddhist monks before the Buddhist monks actually ate it.

Food and drink was also provided for all the guests that attended the funeral. This practice was a form of hospitality for all the guests that came to visit the deceased and their family during the time of death, as they were also helping you pay for the funeral. Since the
community came at the early morning hours until the late evening, there usually was food available for the community to eat all day.

It was not considered a proper and complete funeral without the making of *kaa toum*. Before the alms giving took place (after the funeral service), the process of making *kaa toum* began. The rice, mung bean and stuffing was prepared, banana leaves were gathered, the string was cut and soon after it began to look like a *kaa toum* factory full of women. *Kaa toum* is similar to tamale, but traditionally made with rice, mung bean, pork (savory) or banana (sweet), and wrapped in banana leaves. What the *kaa toum* symbolizes was the last food parting from the living to the deceased. It was believed that the deceased would be able to take the *kaa toum* home wherever they go. *Kaa toum* was an easy food item to make that did not spoil easily, and could travel long distances. The *kaa toum* were ready the night before, and the alms giving took place the next morning. If the deceased died from a bad death, the alms giving took place seven days later, thus the *kaa toum* were made the night before. As the guests departed, they too were given *kaa toum* for their journey home. It was comfort food that many people looked forward to eating during these times. They went quickly, and sometimes the family would put some into hiding for later.

**Modifications in the US**

There is a great abundance and variety of food at the funeral in the US. The food has to be made for more days compared to the funeral in Cambodia, since the funeral itself is extended. Since the food has to be made for the entire funeral, there is more planning and detail about what food is going to be made and the costs have increased dramatically. A family can easily spend up to $1,000 a day on food, drinks, and other items provided for the guests and Buddhist monks. It’s important to cook a wide range of foods for the monks, such as soups, stir-fry’s, vegetable dishes, meat dishes, a dessert, fruits, and so forth because of their different food preferences. It is socially unacceptable if the family does not provide a wide range of food for the monks. Holly, 53, tells of how one must prepare for the arrival of the Buddhist monks for prayers before the day of the funeral service:

You have to have water ready for them. You have to make sure you have water, soft drinks, and some oranges, place it on top of a napkin. [As a woman] you cannot go near them. For their meal, you have to have everything. You have to have soup, fruits, dessert, everything. You have to provide soda, water, rice, at least three different types of food such as soup,
stir fry, or some type of salad. If you don’t have soup, it’s not right. It
doesn’t look good. Some monks may like soup; some may like fried chicken
with papaya or cucumber salad.

It is also considered socially unacceptable if the family of the deceased is not able to provide
enough food throughout the day for all the community members who come by.

The process of making kaa toum begins also after the funeral service. The only
difference from the tradition back in Cambodia is the kaa toum is wrapped in aluminum foil
on top of the banana leaf in order to protect the kaa toum during the cooking process. In my
funeral observations, the gender differences in cooking remained the same as in Cambodia,
but in the US, the women who were primarily cooking were in their 40s and above. The
women 40 years and younger helped with the prep work, cleaning, and running various
errands instead of actually cooking the food.

**Reasons for Modification**

The emphasis on food has developed for a few reasons. In Cambodia, there was not
an emphasis on food because they did not have the money for it. The community helped
each other out by donating what they had, or making food with whatever they had at the
time. In the beginning when the Lao-Cambodian community arrived to the US, they were
not able to provide as much food as the funeral today because they did not have very much
money. As time went on, and they settled more into life in the US by connecting and
learning where other Lao-Cambodians lived, found more work and stable income, the
emphasis on food developed as the community came together again after resettlement. The
Lao-Cambodian community in the US has money compared to life in the Cambodia, thus the
view developed that it is an embarrassment and a source of community gossip when a family
is not able to provide enough food for the Buddhist monks and the guests.

There is also access to a much wider variety of foods in the US. The Lao-
Cambodians in the US are also able to provide a wide range of food because they have access
to various groceries in the stores, from beef to seafood to all sorts of vegetables. The Lao-
Cambodians in the US are also able refrigerate all the food items, where in Cambodia they
way they could preserve food was through pickling or salting. Refrigeration is important
because the funerals in the US last many days.
The Lao-Cambodians in the US continue the traditional practice of making *kaa toum* after the final funeral service, but they do not wait 7 days to for the alms giving for the Buddhist monks, therefore, they do not wait to make *kaa toum* either. Logistically, they cannot wait to bury the deceased that died of a bad death as they did in Cambodia because of their work schedules and their urban living environment.

I also theorize the abundance of food in the US funeral developed from the Lao-Cambodians’ suffering and trauma in the Khmer Rouge and from the poverty they lived with in Cambodia. Whenever I attended any community gatherings or *boun*, there would be extreme excitement about a certain dish because one person or another recalled eating it very seldom in Cambodia. Sometimes I would sit and listen and observe my parents’ generation eating habits at the community and family gatherings, and they tend to overeat because they did not have food as it was scarce in Cambodia and scarcer during the Khmer Rouge. There would always be reference to their experience in the Khmer Rouge or stories that came to them about their experience with the lack of food and the ways they improvised to make it stretch enough for the whole family. These stories about their relationship to food and the poverty they faced were also very prevalent when they first arrived to the US. One of the stories my family told me that I will never forget, was how three eggs were used to serve a family of 10 by mixing in water and oil. Thus, they do not like to be wasteful of food and have a hard time throwing it away. After the planning and making of the food begins, the preparations for the Buddhist monks arrival is simultaneously being worked out by the community leader and the family of the deceased.

**Roles of the Buddhist Monks**

In this section, the traditional roles of the Buddhist monks will be detailed, followed by the changes that have occurred since the Lao-Cambodian arrival to the United States. Subsequently, reasons for modifications to the roles of the Buddhist monks will be discussed.

**Traditional**

The Buddhist monks were central to the foundations of the Lao-Cambodian funeral, and played key roles in the funeral. The Buddhist monks served as an intermediary between the living and the dead through prayer. The Buddhist monks were present at each component of the funeral; which included praying for the deceased before their funeral service, praying
at the funeral service, and the burial. Each time the Buddhist monks came to pray, money was donated to them for their time. During the days leading up to the funeral service, the Buddhist monks came on the days arranged with the family of the deceased. The Buddhist monks came in the morning for prayer, and sometimes in the evening, depending on the request of the family and if the Buddhist monks’ had any prior commitments. The Buddhist monks sat in the largest space of the house, usually the living room where other Buddhist laypersons can come and pray. The Buddhist monks usually sat against a wall, facing the Buddhist laypersons. According to tradition, during the days before the funeral service, the Buddhist monks that came to pray only came in pairs, at least four. On the day of the funeral service, only odd numbers of Buddhist monks were present. After the burial, it did not matter whether it was even or odd number of Buddhist monks. Goldie, 60, says:

> Before the funeral service, you could have even numbers, or pairs of monks. On the day of the funeral service, you must have an odd number, no pairs or an even number of monks. On the day of the cremation, you can get how many monks you want. You have to follow what the monks follow, according to them. It signifies what is good or bad. You can’t just get any amount of monks. When you are older, having more monks is better. When you are younger, having fewer monks is ok. When you are young, you don’t have very much. Some older people have had 100 monks at their funeral, like my husband’s brother’s funeral had 47 because he was a prominent elder in the community in Long Beach. People want a lot of monks for him. He did a lot with the temple, and helped a lot in the community.

For the morning prayer, the Buddhist monks came at around 10 a.m. During the prayer, a white string was tied around the casket that connected the deceased to the Buddhist monks. When the Buddhist monks began the prayer, each monk held on to the string. This symbolized that the deceased directly received the prayers the Buddhist monks were making on their behalf. After the prayer, they were provided lunch soon after before 12 p.m. The Buddhist monks only were allowed liquids after 12 p.m. The prayers the monks chanted also depended on the request of the family. Some prayers the Buddhist monks chanted for the deceased were to inform them they have died, to receive the offerings and good merit made on their behalf by their family and the community, and prayers that put the deceased on the right path to get to heaven.

In Cambodia, traditionally young boys became monks for their parents. This was called *buadt tamadaa*, the literal translation is “the regular way of becoming a monk.” This was practiced because the men are making merit for their parents for giving birth to them,
and traditionally it was preferred they become monks before they are married. This is considered a rite of passage for each male before they get married a club which their parents can become a part of. Men also became novice monks for someone that had died in their family. This was called *buadt joong*, meaning to “become a monk to walk.” This practice symbolized the monks helping the deceased walk to heaven. The men who became monks also help the deceased get more *boun*, while also getting *boun* for themselves. This also helped ensure the deceased’s entrance into heaven. Where did the tradition come from? Virath, 67, recounts:

> It’s like helping them get to heaven. The story goes that when your children become monks, we must donate the monk cloth. This woman passed away and she was going to go down very deep below (to hell) in Cambodia, so she was going to fall and below (in hell) you see this reddish orange fire, and they saw that her son became a monk, and said, “Oh, why is it so orange red like the color cloth of the monk?” From then on, since her child became a novice monk for her, they did not keep her in the bottom. The story came from that. You are taken to the bottom if you had a lot of sin, which is why she was taken down below in the first place. So that’s why we have our children become Buddhist novices for us. In Cambodia, it’s very typical by the age of 20 that everyone becomes a novice monk for your parents for this purpose. From the story, you are helping your parents walk your parents to heaven, preventing from falling into hell and having them go to heaven.

If the deceased was a very young person, around 20 years old or younger, they did not have anyone become monks for them. The reason was not clear, but it was suggested the reasons were matters of money and tradition. Anyone in the deceased’s family became a novice Buddhist monk for the deceased. In preparation for the transformation, all hair on the head was shaved off. This included the eyebrows, mustache, beards, goatees, and hair on the head.

The transformation took place before the day of the funeral service. The Buddhist monks, through ritual and prayer, transformed the laymen into novice monks at the temple. This was where the laymen changed out of their layperson’s clothes into Buddhist monk cloth. As soon as the male family members of the deceased became novice monks, they had to follow all customs and practices as the other Buddhist monks. They sat and prayed with the Buddhist monks when they prayed, they ate when the Buddhist monks ate, and followed what the Buddhist monks did day to day. Women were not allowed to go near the Buddhist monks, and this included the novice Buddhist monks. They were no longer referred to by
their first name, but they were called novice, followed by their name. For example, Larry would be referred to as novice Larry or samanaaeen or naeen (short for samanaaeen) Larry in Lao.

On the day of the funeral service, the Buddhist monks (including the novice Buddhist monks) “walk” the deceased to heaven by leading the casket to the cremation or burial site. A white string was tied around the casket, and the monks lead the walk to the burial site, holding on to the white string that connected them to the deceased (see Figure 3). After the funeral service (concluded after the thak baht), the novice monks would change back into the layperson’s clothing or stay longer as a novice monk at the temple, depending on their own personal decision, availability and work obligations.

![Figure 3. The last procession with the body. The Buddhist monks, followed by the novice monks, hold onto the white string that is tied to the casket, walking the deceased to heaven. Personal archive.](image)

The Buddhist monks also served as intermediaries between the living and the dead through the practice of baangsagoon, as mentioned earlier in the boun section. Baangsagoon was the practice of “giving” items for the deceased to the Buddhist monks, so they may call upon them to receive them. This happened after the alms giving called thak baht. These items for the baangsagoon were items that the deceased used often and needed when they were living. It was believed that the deceased used and needed these same items in the
spiritual world. The items that were gathered included clothing (usually their favorite piece), undergarments, and hygiene items, kitchen utensils such as pots, pans, a mortar and pestle, and so forth. The items were gathered together and given to the Buddhist monks. Ricky, 54, talks about the significance of *baangsagoon*:

> Tradition says that with the string, we wrap everything, to make sure the deceased will receive everything, their clothes, everything where we donate to the Buddhist monks for the deceased. You tell the deceased they can come pick up their clothes and such now that we donated it to the temple, to the monks. You do it the day of *thak baht*. Some people, if you don’t do that, the spirit may worry about these things, and if we give them to someone else (the living), their spirit may follow that person. You have to tell the spirit.

Once the Buddhist monks called for the deceased to receive the items, any personal clothing was returned to the family of the deceased. Non-personal items such as kitchen utensils were donated to the temple. Anything the Buddhist monks did not need was put into a community donation box where the community could take what they needed or wanted.

**Modifications in the US**

The Lao-Cambodian funeral in the US requires the Buddhist monks to come to the funeral house for prayers for more days since the funeral is longer in the US than Cambodia. If the Buddhist monks from the local temple are not available, calls can be made to other Buddhist monks in neighboring cities to come for the day. Travel expenses for the distant Buddhist monks are usually paid for by the deceased’s family. Donations are still made to the Buddhist monks (including the novice Buddhist monks), but donations are also made for any of the Buddhist monks’ miscellaneous costs such as any medications they take or things they need such as personal hygiene items like toothpaste, deodorant, and the like. In the middle of the prayers, the Buddhist monks pray to the deceased by having a white string tied around the deceased’s photo, with the end of the string extended in all the Buddhist monks’ hand.

The males becoming novice monks for the deceased is still practiced, but it has undergone some logistical changes. In the US, the age of the deceased does not dictate if males in the family become a novice monk for them. The family of the deceased will consult with the community leader to see their opinion on the matter. Not everyone male could become a monk as easily as in Cambodia. Some cannot get out of their work obligations, or
some restrictions to work appearance may prevent them from doing so since becoming a
monk requires shaving your head and eyebrows. One participant, Janae, 28, stated that her
husband could not become a novice monk for his father because he was not allowed to shave
off his eyebrows for work.

The novice monks spend the about two nights at the temple; the first night is the
transformation, and the second is the night before the day of the funeral service. The novice
monks usually change back into their layperson’s clothing once they have thak baht, which
symbolizes the end of the boun. Some samananaeen may choose to stay at the temple longer,
past the funeral service, on their own merit in order to produce good deeds for themselves or
their parents. Some have stayed a week, others a month. Others do not remain a novice
monk past the day of the funeral service because of work or school obligations.

Generally by the time the novice monks were going to transform from layperson to a
novice monk, the family of the deceased has already arranged a date for the viewing and the
funeral service. The ritual takes place at the temple or at the viewing of the deceased,
depending on the preference of the family. Most of the time, the transformation ritual takes
place at the viewing of the deceased. The demographics of the novice monks have changed
since the Lao-Cambodians immigration to the US. This is a recent change that I observed in
my participant observations. The males in the deceased’s family still become novice monks,
including their in-laws, but close friends are also becoming novice monks for the deceased.
Lao-Cambodians are not the only ones becoming novice monks, but Mexican Americans and
African Americans are participating as well.

**Reasons for Modification**

What caused the changes in the Lao-Cambodian funeral practice are logistics,
availability of resources, the defiance of assimilation, and convenience. In the funeral in the
US, when the monks come to pray in the home, they tie the string around the photo of the
decedent instead of the body because the body is no longer kept in the home. The
participants thought they had to follow the Western funeral practice, including the body
placement, believed the body could not be kept in the home. All the participants thought that
this was illegal. The Lao-Cambodian community also improvised the use of the Buddhist
monks from distant temples if the local Buddhist monks were not available for the days
requested. The family of the deceased and the community members called on other temples, some as far as 400 miles away, for their presence for the funeral.

In Cambodia, if the deceased was young, in their 20s or 30s, did not have any children or a family of their own, the community did not have anyone become novice monks for them. Now, the elders have permitted the young people to have males become novice monks for them. Kevin, 69, explains why this is permitted:

It’s not a big issue here in US. The elders don’t mind. Especially because in Cambodia we did not have a lot of the monk’s clothing, that’s why for the young deceased we really did not have them become novice monks there. Here, we are not poor like we were in Cambodia, we have money. In Cambodia we did not have enough of the monk cloth, only enough for the real monks and sometimes the deceased elders did not have novices because of the limited cloth available.

Ricky’s son, who died in his early 20s and did not have a wife or family, had novice monks for him:

I ask the monks and they say it’s ok. Some say no, but I ask the monks and they say yes. When they become monks for the deceased, they get boun in the afterlife. His uncles became monks for him because they love him, and they want him to get to heaven. So when he is reborn, they (those who became monks for him) will get the boun too.

This practice was modified because there were enough resources to pay for the clothing for the novices and the community believed that it was helping the deceased get to heaven.

The transformation for both laypersons in Cambodia and the US occurred the night before the service for different reasons. The transformation of the laypersons into novice monks in Cambodia happened the night before the funeral service because the entire funeral lasted only 2 to 3 days. Often, once someone died, the next day, they had the final service and the deceased was buried. In the US, the laypersons transformed into novice Buddhist monks the night before the funeral service because of their work and school availability. With the length of the funeral in the US lasting 7 to 14 days, some family members requested days off closer to the funeral service because it is the most significant day to attend. As many funeral services took place over the weekend, the family members only had to take one or two days off in order to become a novice monk.

The laypersons in the US have transformed into Buddhist monks at the temple and the mortuary. The place of transformation for the laypersons depended on the family, and often depended on the deceased or their family’s relationship to the temple. Most of the time, the
family of the deceased will have the laypersons become novice monks at the mortuary rather than the temple, out of convenience because they can also have the viewing at the same time. They did not see this modification as hurting the deceased.

The changing demographics of the novice monks are a result of defiance of assimilation and modifications to the traditional practice. Traditional assimilation theory states that the minority groups attempts to be like the majority group, but here, we have minority groups adopting another minority group’s culture. The assimilation did not occur “spontaneously” as Park states, but it occurred when the minority groups came into contact with each other. This also proves that antagonisms do not arise between groups that are different, as many race relations theorists believed (Marger 2009) and interethnic contact do not always produce a negative outcome (Barth and Noel 1972).

Friends and family now become novice monks for the deceased where in Cambodia only family became novice monks. This practiced emerged in the US, and the demographics of the novice monks changed as well. Southeast Asians are marrying and befriending with other ethnic groups. In my funeral observations, there were Mexican Americans and African Americans that became novice monks. They are embracing the Southeast Asian culture by wanting to participate in becoming a novice monk for those they were close to and whom they cared for. It’s not only the Lao that want to make good merit and help the deceased get to heaven, but close friends and in-laws that are not from the same ethnic group. This seems to be a recent development within the last year shows that the Lao-Cambodian community is integrating with other ethnic groups in the US.

**THE CASKET, FUNERAL, BURIAL, AND CREMATION**

In this section, the traditional practices of preparing, handling, planning, care and acquisition of the casket, funeral, burial, and cremation will be detailed, followed by the changes that have occurred since the Lao-Cambodian arrival to the United States. Subsequently, reasons for modifications to the preparations, handling, planning, acquisition and care of the casket, funeral, burial, and cremation practices will be discussed.

**Traditional**

The funeral service, burial and cremation all happened very quickly once the deceased passed away. The casket was made by the family of the deceased and sometimes
the community. Made with wood, the casket was kept in the home before the service. At times, each part of the casket might be made by someone different. One person may provide the wood, another may construct the casket, and another may paint it or decorate it. Everyone helped each other out by providing some sort of assistance. Jenny, 68, talked about how the casket was made in Cambodia:

Back home we make it ourselves. We got flowers and cut them and put them [on the casket]. This country, you need money. Back home, we work and help each other out. One person is sawing the wood, another is nailing the coffin together, and another person is painting it. We help each other back home. In this country there is no place for that. You have to buy the casket.

A casket may also have been made prior to one’s death, depending on the person or the family. The premade caskets were kept at the temple. The casket may be lined with some cloth or a saat, or a straw mat, if one has one in possession. Once the casket was made, the body was lifted into the casket. The casket is set on a small, about 1 inch platform built to hold the casket. There may be a flower arrangement surrounding the casket and there may be a photo of the deceased (if the family had one at all), along with a lantern for nightfall.

The casket was watched at all times, like a security guard at a bank. There was a great fear that a black cat will come near and jump across the casket. It was believed that a black cat was actually a ghost, attempting to awake the body while it has not been properly buried. As people come and go throughout the day, someone, typically the elders are watching the casket. Of course, they may be socializing with each other, or taking care of the donations, but one of their main purposes was to watch out for a black cat. Holly, 53, further explains:

They say the ghost will rise up and awaken (the dead), their head and neck will prop up really quick. They say, if the black cat jumps across the casket, the ghost (the deceased’s dead body) will rise up. They sit and watch over and protect the casket to make sure a black cat doesn’t cross it. It’s like that, with ghost caskets they will not allow black cats to come near or cross. They are scared the black cat will come and jump. Cats like to come near the dead bodies. I don’t know, maybe they want to eat the human remains.

Although they did not have ways to preserve the body through refrigeration, the community still found ways to mask the smells or help the deceased appear at peace. Guava leaves were used to put over the body to help mask the smell. It was believed that those who have died and have their eyes and mouths opened died worrying about their family and loved ones they left behind. Perhaps they did not get a chance to say goodbye, or they may simply
worry about their family’s well-being. Candle wax was also used to help close the mouth of the deceased if it would not keep closed on its own. If the deceased’s eyes were open, those sitting around the casket would use keep their fingers pressed on the eyelids until they stayed shut. One could only imagine the fingers cramping up by providing this service to the deceased.

The casket was kept in the home if they died from a good death such as natural sickness or old age. If one died of a “bad death,” such as violence, or a snake bite, the body was kept outside the home. This was due to the belief that the death may cause others to die in a similar manner. A small, mini home is built for the casket to rest in. Sometimes they may rest under a tree shade. Jenny, 68, describes how and why the deceased who died a bad death was kept outside the home:

They say it will attach to us and will cause others to die in a similar manner. It’s kept under a little hut. Then we just walk the body in a group and bury them. Back home, there was no one living around us, it was a farm. We made a little stand to put the body on, we lay a straw mat under the body, made a little mini house for the body outside of the home. We had a boun for the deceased at our home, but the body was not kept in the home due to the nature of the death. Anyone that died from a bad death, the body was kept outside the home. The deceased’s spirit is lost, where they wander because they don’t know where to go because they died suddenly, not like a sickness or natural death.

Forms of identification and money were put into the casket of the deceased. In Cambodia, people did not have their own identification cards, but rather a piece of paper identifying the whole family name and unit. The father and his name was usually the main person identified on this paper. This was put into the casket so that the deceased would have some form of identification in the spirit world. Betty, 65, states:

It is just like any living human being here. We give it to the deceased in case they may need any proof of identification for any reason. We’re afraid that someone might ask them these kinds of things, so we help prepare them for it just like in the living world. This is to make sure they have everything they might need.

Money was also put into their casket so they would have money if needed in the afterlife. The clothes on their body would be cut, just a small snippet, to prevent others from trying to stealing or robbing their clothing from them in the afterlife.

As mentioned earlier in the boun section, the day of the service was chosen depending if it is a good day or bad day. The monks would pray in the morning the day of
the service before the mourners and family. The males carried the body to the burial or
cremation location. After the morning prayer, the monks ate. Next, the family of the
deceased donated the orange monk cloth to the Buddhist monks. The donation was made
usually only by the family of the deceased. The donations of the monk cloths symbolized the
clothes the deceased wore in the afterlife. Around 1 p.m. or 2 p.m. in the afternoon,
everyone prepared for the trek to the forest. Mainly the elders, adults and children in their
late teens were allowed to walk with everyone to the burial site. Children ages seventeen and
under were not allowed to go because the journey was very long and dangerous for their little
bodies. There was also fear that the wandering ghosts at the burial site who came to pick up
the deceased might attach to their bodies because they were so vulnerable at that age.
Sometimes they would have to perform an exorcism like prayer to release the spirits from the
young child’s body.

The deceased was carried to the forest to a designated cemetery where burials and
cremations took place. The walk to the forest took one to two hours. Mourners brought
water along with the trip. The burials and cremations took place away from the living; they
did not want people to be buried or cremated among cattle and agriculture. The monks lead
the parade like a walk, while holding a white string that was tied around the casket that
followed. This symbolized the Buddhist monks walking the deceased to heaven. Following
the casket was the rest of the community. The men carried the casket all the way to the
forest. Sometimes, the casket would be extremely heavy, even though the deceased was very
thin. Holly, 53, paints a vivid picture that triggered the chills:

We would take bamboo, or something similar, because we had a lot of
bamboo, and stack it up like a bed. Then we’d figure out how many people
we need to lift the casket onto the bamboo, and it was usually one person in
the front, middle and end of the casket. Then we would lift the casket onto the
wood. When we would lift the body onto the wood for cremation, it was so,
so, so heavy. It was so heavy to even carry the casket to the forest for the
cremation. They say his friends were coming along too. They have their
friends on top of his casket. Sometimes people who died of sickness got to be
very, very skinny, but their casket would be so heavy. They say, their friends
have come to pick them up…If the person was big and heavy set, it would be
even heavier. That’s why the monks come and pray so often and why they
lead when carrying the casket to the cremation place. That’s why we tie the
white string around the casket, and carry the casket like a parade to the
cremation or burial ground…the burial or cremation place is very far. It’s not
close like how it is in America…we go to where no one lives. And when we
would cremate and light up the casket, it would smell very bad, very stinky. …Sometimes, the casket would burn and then you could see the person’s leg popping up, yes! I’d stand there and watch it. Sometimes it would not burn and they had to get a small axe and cut up the body parts that would be sticking up in the air. It’s like, when you would kill a fish that hasn’t died completely yet… the casket was wood, so it sometimes burns faster than the actual body of the deceased, so you still would sometimes see their body in there after the wood burned. And it would smell, so they would have someone chop down the body parts, usually they would have someone who was drunk to do it. Sometimes the liver would burst, body fluids bursting and flying, yes.

If the deceased died from a good death, they were cremated. If the deceased died from a bad death, they were buried. Three years later, the body was re-exhumed and cremated. The body was dug up by the close family members and then cremated by the family. The observance is just like the funeral service, except it is for the observance of resuming the body. If you were about seventy years or older and you died of a bad death, you were allowed to be cremated.

Once the body was buried or cremated, everyone started walking back to the boun house. One or two people may stay behind to watch the burning of the body. The next day a close family member returns and gathers the ashes to the temple. A small ceremony is held with the assistance of the Buddhist monks, mainly with close family was in attendance. The ashes were put in a little box and laid in a mausoleum like space.

The last practice that concluded the funeral ceremony was the thak baht. This was the practice of alms giving to the monks by the Buddhist lay people. The monks lined up with their alms bowl in place, and the novice monks first, then Buddhist laypeople, gather rice in a plate and line up and one by one. As they bow their heads before putting the alms into the alms bowl, each person puts about a spoonful of rice, some money and kaa toum into each of the monk’s alms bowl. The laypersons eat after together when the monks are done with their meal. Small groups are formed, some at the table or some inside the home where everyone sits down together to eat. There are not as many people this morning because the most significant day, the funeral service is over.

If the deceased was buried and not cremated, the end procession of thak baht had to occur seven days after the burial. You had to wait to make kaa toum. It may take the deceased seven days to be aware that they have died. Jenny, 68, states:
If you died a bad death, you didn’t *thak baht* (the last day of offerings) after you were buried. You didn’t make *kaa toum*. You had to wait seven days and then do have the last day of *thak baht*, not like how it is in America. They say, you wait seven days because the spirit has not become aware they are dead yet…When you die of a bad death, you don’t know that you died yet, not like if you died of natural causes like sickness or death because you know you are dying, yes, this was back home. When you are dying of a natural death, you’re more aware of yourself and you’re talking to yourself along the way, saying, “Oh I will die soon.”

When the Buddhists laypersons finished the last part of the funeral practices of *thak baht* and making *kaa toum*, they pray they said the final prayers for the deceased and “poured water into the earth” by pouring a little water into a small bowl, telling the deceased that they may come and receive the food, prayers and their items in *baangsagoon*. This was done so the deceased can go peacefully, because the deceased’s family had done everything and given the deceased everything they needed for them to be able to live in the spiritual world. The deceased were given food, identification, prayers to enter heaven, everything they had in the when they were living world, so they did not have to worry about anyone or anything they left behind when they passed away.

After the funeral, the family of the deceased could have another observance, called *boun sangataan*. This observance could be done anytime by the family of the deceased.

Ricky, 54, stated:

*Sangataan* is like saying; we want them to get more *boun*, before they might run out of *boun*. You have to have *boun*, if you do not, they might not be reborn. The spirit may run out of energy. You can do *sangataan* anytime. You can do it for your mothers and fathers, whoever has passed away. If you don’t do it, the spirit can’t do nothing. They depend on us.

**Modifications in the US**

This is the day where most people attend the funeral. On this significant day, mourners typically wear black. Family members who are closest to the deceased wear white to the funeral service. Everyone gathers before and after the service at the *baan boun*. Once the monks pray and eat lunch, everyone that is at the *baan boun* drives to the funeral service together. The funeral service usually takes place at the mortuary, but seldom it takes place at the temple. Some people, prior to their passing, requested that they have their service at the temple, while some families decide to have the service there for their loved ones. In America, everyone except pregnant women attend the funeral. It is believed to be bad luck
for a pregnant woman to go near a dead body. From the older citizens, to babies and young children, all ages attend the funeral service, cremation and burial. A few people stay behind to cook and watch the house for the family.

The funeral service typically starts between 12 p.m. and 1 p.m. This is important because the funeral service takes about three hours, and it may be rushed depending if another funeral is planned after on the same day. Rarely does the service take less than three hours, unless the funeral home gives them a specified time period. Prior to the start of the service, mourners may come up and view the body. A mark is put on the body with lipstick or a marker. This mark is put on their body to identify them later on if the deceased is reincarnated through someone else. For example, someone in the deceased’s immediate family may get pregnant after the death of the deceased, and we will know if the baby is a reincarnation of the deceased if they have a birthmark or mark on their body that was made on the deceased at their funeral. Copies of the deceased’s identification, driver’s license, and social security card are made and put into their casket. Other things such a sentimental jewelry may be put with the deceased.

In the front of the funeral home, guests can sign a guest book and take a program for the deceased. Facing the front of the room, the casket is placed at the center of the room, and large flower arrangements are placed to the left and right of the casket. A large photo of the deceased is placed at the head of the casket. There are also lamps to the right and left of the casket (see Figure 4). In front of the podium is a table with new monk cloths that are going to be donated and part of the funeral service. Saats are also laid on the bottom floor. The Buddhist monks (novice monks included) usually sit in chairs, usually to the left of the room behind the podium. Part of the Buddhist hierarchy, Buddhist laypersons usually sit on the saats on the floor along with the close family members, with the rest of the community sitting behind them. The close family members sit at the front of the room. On the day of the funeral service the room is at full capacity, where some are left standing in the
back of the room and others standing outside in front of the funeral home. Depending on the funeral home, a television may play a photo slide show of the deceased.

Once everything is set up for the service, one of the community leaders welcomes everyone and tells them how the service is going to proceed. They may mention they are on time constraints and may have to go through the service as soon as possible. The service begins with prayers from the monks. As they begin this, one of the community leaders begins to tie a white string around the casket and then passes it along to all the monks to hold it in their hands. This symbolizes the monks’ direct link to the deceased so that they receive the prayers being made for them. After the prayers, next come the donations of the monk cloths. Families and friends that were close to the deceased can purchase and donate the cloths to the monks as well. This often includes the deceased’s immediate family, their grandchildren, their brothers and sisters and their families, cousins and their families, anyone that is related to the deceased can donate a cloth. In addition, close friends may also donate the monk cloth for the deceased. Each group that donates is called up to pray and “give” the cloth to the deceased. This must be planned and taken care of before the service so the community leaders will know who to call. Each group is called up in order of relation, from
immediate family to the distant relatives and lastly close friends. First, all the monks are called up to the casket to donate the first cloth. Two of the head monks come up to lead a prayer, while the monk cloth is placed on in the center of the open casket. Everyone repeats the prayer, and then everyone returns to their seats. Each group follows in order. This process of calling up each group and having them come up to the casket and “give” the cloth to the deceased may take up to 40 minutes.

Next, one of the community leaders reads a biography about the deceased. This may include details about the deceased’s life such as their birthplace, parents, family members, cause of death, and so forth. After the deceased’s biography, close family members are invited to come say a few words. Some families may read a poem, talk about the memories they had of the deceased, or give thanks for the community’s support in this time of death. The community leader comes up and then begins to read how much was received from the donations overall. He then breaks it down and announces how much the immediate family donated, how much was received from different city, country, or state. Sometimes a collection basket is passed around during the service.

Finally, everyone is called up to view the deceased one last time before the cremation or burial. Sometimes small flower arrangements are made at the boun house prior to the service. It may be a few pieces of a carnation or a similar flower tied with incense. Other families may buy paper made dok bua, or lotus flowers commonly found throughout Southeast Asia, to give to the deceased one last time before the burial or cremation takes place. The immediate family lines up first and puts the flowers in their casket, then they line up typically next to the podium to greet guests and thank them for coming, one by one. The immediate family members of the deceased stand at the front of the podium in the nop pose to greet and thank the guests for attending the funeral. The nop pose is the Lao gesture for a greeting which is done by putting both hands together, normally at chest level or higher if someone is of a higher position such as a Buddhist monk.

After all the mourners have viewed the body, the family prepares to walk the casket to the crematory or burial site. The casket is closed and the white string is tied around the casket. The head monks first followed by the novice monks, each holding onto the white string, lead to the casket to the burial or crematory site. Next follows the casket with the pallbearers, then family members that are holding the deceased’s picture and flower
arrangements. Following the family members are the rest of the mourners. This walk to the crematory or burial site looks like a huge parade.

The final disposition of the deceased varies, depending on the family of the deceased. Some families have prepared for deaths in the family (especially if they have an aging mother or father) by purchasing a burial plot. Some families have purchased a burial plot after a family member has passed away, while others have yet to bury their loved ones because they have not paid off the purchase of the burial plot. Families of the deceased either bury the deceased at the cemetery in the ground, in a mausoleum, or at the temple.

For a cremation, often the crematory is on the same grounds as the funeral home. The casket is not carried to the crematory, but rather put on a casket bed and rolled by the pallbearers to the crematory lead by the Buddhist and novice monks, followed by those in attendance. The monks will say their last prayers for the deceased, and those close to the deceased will put the casket into the chambers. Not everyone is in the room to witness the cremation because of the space limitations. Lastly, one person pushes the button and the family awaits a call to pick up the ashes. The next day or two, there is a smaller ceremony with the Buddhist monks where the deceased’s ashes are buried in the ground. They are cremated or buried for the same reasons as in Cambodia.

For a burial, the casket is carried to the burial site. In some cases, the funeral services may take place at a nearby funeral home, and a hearse is used to transport the casket to the burial site. If the service is at a wat (temple), a hearse is used to transport the casket to the burial or crematory site. Propped onto the burial plot, the monks gather around the casket and say their last prayers before the casket is lowered into the ground. The monks drop some dirt into the ground, followed by the immediate family who may throw in flowers, some items that were important or sentimental to the deceased. After the immediate family has had their time, the rest of the guests are welcomed to do the same. This is but a quick burial, about 30 minutes. Once everyone has had the chance to say good bye, the funeral directors are quick to announce everyone must leave in order for the funeral workers to finish the burial. The Lao-Cambodians does not re-exhume the body after three years of the burial.

The next morning, thak baht takes place. Signifying the end of the funeral service, it begins in the morning at 10 a.m. There is a prayer in the morning, and then the Buddhist monks arrive to receive the alms giving, while the novice monks give the alms first, and then
also eat with the regular monks. Food is made this morning too, for the deceased to receive the final offerings (until the 100 day celebration) and for the Buddhist monks to eat.

Surprisingly, the American funeral practices were not the only cultural integration the Lao-Cambodians adopted into their funeral customs. A new practice that has started in American is the observance of 100 day celebration called *boun lua vaan*. This is the observance for the deceased 100 days after their death. The foundations of the temple began in the 1990s, when some of the Lao-Cambodians began moving to the Inland Empire. In the 1990s, they had only been in America about 10 years. Some of the Buddhist monks for this temple came from Thailand, and thus the practice of observing the 100 days after someone’s death, also called *boun lua vaan*. At the suggestion of the Thai monks, the Lao-Cambodians started to observe this custom that was practiced in Thailand mostly among the rich and affluent who observed the 100 day *boun* for their deceased. It is planned in advanced, and once the date gets closer the calls are made to a few people who inform others. It lasts only two days, always on the weekend.

**Reasons for Modifications**

The modification of the funeral service, casket, burial and cremations in the Lao-Cambodian community are due to assimilation, perceived funeral regulations and laws, the commercialization of services, convenience, influence from the media and influence from the Thais’ religious practices. The Lao-Cambodians learned about the Western funeral practices through conversation with other Lao-Cambodian families in the US and discussing how they handled the funeral for their family. The Lao-Cambodians also learned about the Western funeral practices through the media via movies and television. Holly, 53, states:

> How we came to do our funerals in America is that we started to talk to each other in the community, to see how they have done the funerals for the deceased in their family, see what they experienced. Then we also relied on those who knew how to speak more English than we did. The community would say, Oh, the Americans die this way, do things this way, and so forth. We also watched movies and television and saw how they did the funerals in America.

Wearing black clothing to the funeral, having the funeral service at the mortuary, talking about the deceased’s life story, the way set up of the funeral service at the mortuary, making and giving out flower arrangements for the mourners, is a result of assimilation. The Lao-Cambodians in the US assimilated Western funeral practices because they feel they have
to incorporate the funeral practices out of fear of not fitting in. Common phrases made from a majority of the participants were, “This is not our home,” “It is the American custom,” “We have to,” and “It’s not my system.” The Lao-Cambodians thought they had to follow the perceived funeral laws and customs. There is one Funeral Rule that is issued by the Federal Government. According to the Funeral Rule:

1. You have the right to choose the funeral goods and services you want (with some exceptions).
2. The funeral provider must state this right in writing on the general price list.
3. If the state or local law requires you to buy any particular item, the funeral provider must disclose it on the price list, with a reference to the specific law.
4. The funeral provider may not refuse, or charge a fee, to handle a casket you bought elsewhere.

Based on my research, the participants in my study were not aware of this rule, nor does it seem that many Americans are aware of their funerary rights and protections from funeral homes and others sectors within the funeral industry. Although it states above that the Funeral Rule is enforced by the Federal Trade Commission, Mitford (1963), Slocum and Carlson (2011) have documented those members of the funeral industry use deceptive practices nationwide. The lack of a nationwide federal funeral rules makes it harder for consumers to protect their own rights, with rules varying from the state to the local, from jurisdiction to jurisdiction (Slocum and Carlson 2011).

In California, the requirements are: one must produce a death certificate for the deceased, bodies must be embalmed or refrigerated within 24 hours (this is applied to the funeral home licensee), and a disposition permit must be completed stating the final resting place of the deceased. During my interviews, I informed the participants of this information regarding California’s funeral requirements, but they were in disbelief.

In California, individuals or parties may build their own caskets or purchase one outside the mortuary or funeral home providing funeral services for the deceased and the mortuary providing the services cannot charge a handling fee. The state of California does not require someone to be embalmed, as all of my participants believed. According to Slocum and Carlson, “embalming is almost never required” (2011:57). In fact, bodies can be kept in the home if a family is having an in-home wake where “temperature control is
sufficient” (Slocum and Carlson 2011:64). Slocum and Carlson (2011) state, “In most cases, a body will keep for two or three days at 70 degrees or cooler without offensive decomposition or odor” (64). California does not require funerals to be overseen by a funeral director.

The adoption of the Western funeral practice was also a result of the commercialization of the funeral industry in the US. The mortuary offered services where they took care of the body, provided a casket, burial services, and a place to hold the service. When asked why the Lao-Cambodian community did not make the casket themselves, Vothy, 57, explains:

No we don’t. They don’t make caskets here. You have to buy like everyone else, following American custom. Back home we make it ourselves, we help each other build it, put the body into the casket.

Thong, 51, also states that the elders taught the community to purchase the caskets:

We’d have to buy our own material. Plus the elders taught us to just buy it since in the US they have businesses who sell them. In Cambodia no one sold caskets, which is why we built our own. We were born in the countryside, in the rural parts where we raised animals and farmed. The poor lived in the countryside.

Many participants stated they did the funeral this way because it was the way the elders told them to do it. Thong also reveals why they did not keep the body in the home:

The elders did not teach us to do it that way. It’s also the wrong thing to do in US, it’s against their custom.

Tony, 57, also replies:

No one does it, and it’s against American culture. They have a place to keep the body. So we cannot keep the body at home. They care about the body. We don’t want them to think we are not taking care of the body. We do it the way they do it.

In Cambodia, only the young adults, adults and elders were allowed attend the funeral service. Many of the participants stated everyone goes to the funeral service here because that’s what the Americans do. Thong, 51, states:

In Cambodia, the body is in the home, and we pray, all the family, at the house because not everyone can go to the burial or cremation. We prepared for the trek by taking water and such. The little kids cannot go because we went to the forest, and because we would not let them. Only the adults, elders, and those carrying the casket were allowed to go. Our custom was that the kids couldn’t go. It was where all the deceased were and you did not go
near it unless it was someone’s funeral. It was a forest; it had lots of wood and trees. Yes, we were not going to the forest in the US.

Ricky, 54, states why the funeral service is set up the way it is in the US:

Every funeral you have to do it like that. The Americans set it up like that, except they don’t have monks and don’t have the chanting. But they pray up front like we do.

The funeral service location depends on the family and the deceased. Sometimes the deceased may request to have their service at the temple. If the family chooses to have the service at the temple, often it’s because the family of the deceased or the deceased has stronger ties to the temple. Betty’s husband, who passed away, had the funeral service at the temple. It ended up being less expensive (at the time, in the 1990s, but now it’s the same price whether you had the service at the mortuary or temple). Prior to his passing, he helped set up the foundations to the temple and he was the main community organizer working with the temple. Some also believe it’s convenient for the Lao-Cambodian community to have the funeral service, disposition of the body all at one place. Ricky, 54, says:

Some people can do that [have the funeral service at the temple]. You can do it at the temple if they let you. Mostly people do it at the cemetery because it’s more convenient. It’s not like having it at the cemetery though, it’s not the same. Sometimes it’s the weather, or bugs, things like that. You can bring the body to the temple if you want so suppose it was me. I work at the temple for a long, long time. I might tell my wife and kids that I want the service there, and do have the funeral there. Just like my mom, she said don’t take my body to the temple. Sometimes when you might have a service at the temple, people eat there, create trash, and drink. When they do things like drink at the temple, it’s a sin. It’s what some may believe. So it depends on the people.

Whether the family chooses to have the funeral service at the temple or a funeral home, Betty says “anywhere we go we will always do it according to Buddhist religious beliefs.”

Open caskets at a funeral service was not common in Cambodia, as it is in America. Nancy, 61, explains why the casket is not open in Cambodia:

That’s because we are able to preserve the body in America through embalming, so we can look at the body, there was no smell. You could look at the body yourself, and that was it.

The elders also help decide when it is not appropriate to keep the casket in America open. In Tony’s case of his daughter who died of a heart attack and was not refrigerated by the hospital and waited for the funeral home pick up, he says:
Yes, if they were not swollen or such. And if we choose to have it open. Yes, I wanted an open casket but the elders said no because it was not pretty to look at.

If one is buried, it must be in an established cemetery. In the case of home burials, local jurisdictions and local officials grant permission. If a person is cremated, the remains may be buried in a cemetery, they may be “scattered or interned” on the home property with permission of the landowner, or they may be kept in the home per the person caring for the deceased (the person having the right to control the disposition). If you want to do this for your remains, it must be arranged within your disposition before your death. Slocum and Carlson (2011) state, “Cremated remains may not be transported without a permit from the country health department, and they may not be disposed of in reuse.” But again, as noted by Slocum and Carlson, there is no “cremains police” to enforce this. Some families have resisted the American funeral practices by keeping the ashes of their family members at the temple as well. This is also the road less taken. First, there must be a place where the temple keeps the ashes of the deceased. Once that is established, then the family of the deceased can decide whether or not to keep the ashes of the deceased there. Sometimes this is the request of the deceased prior to their death, and sometimes it is the choice of the family. When asked why Nathan, 44, and his family decided to bury their parents at the temple, he stated it was a family decision and a way to stay true to their roots. He also saw nothing was set in stone:

My brothers and I talked about it. We said, Hey what are we going to do with the ashes? We decided, and if before they died they said they want their ashes here or there, we are going to do what they asked. Since we did not know, we decided what the best was for them. There is nothing set in stone, you do what you want. It’s a common place, for our traditions. Commonly in our tradition we bury the ashes at the temple. We put the ashes in a little container and every now and then we go to the temple to pray. Once in a while we go water the plants, pray for them there. We can do anytime you want. Normally on Buddhist days they want you to go and do it.

What also plays a factor in keeping the ashes at the temple is if the temple has a designated place for the deceased like in Cambodia. When other participants were asked why they did not keep the deceased at the temple, some stated there was not a place for them. It was also implied that the temple where Nathan kept his parents did not legally have a permit to do so. Although there is support from the community with the donations, sometimes it is still not enough to help with all expenses to the funeral. One participant, Karen, 81, was not able to bury her husband’s ashes after he was cremated. At the time of
the interview, it had been a year to his passing. Karen put a down payment on his plot, but has not been able to pay it off. The mortuary has not allowed her to bury her husband until it is paid off. She keeps his ashes with her at home. I’m sure she is still waiting to bury her husband’s ashes at the cemetery.

The practice of the donation of the monk cloth has been modified because of the Lao-Cambodian’s access to resources and money (or lack thereof while living in Cambodia). In the US, the immediate family of the deceased and other distant relatives are able to purchase the monk cloths because they have the money and there are more monk cloths available. The practice of donating the monk cloth in the US during the funeral service also developed out of convenience, as the entire funeral service occurs all at one place.

The Lao-Cambodians in the US no longer practice the traditional custom of re-exhuming the body 3 years after someone died from a bad death. In Cambodia, this practice was done by the deceased’s family. In the US, the family of the deceased has to pay for the mortuary to re-exhume and then cremate the body. The family of the deceased also saw that since their family was in a good resting place at the cemetery, it was okay for them not to re-exhume the body.

The Lao-Cambodians in the US no longer wait to make *kaa toum* and wait to do the practice of alms giving if the deceased died from a bad death and was buried. Logistically, it was possible in Cambodia because they were not constrained by work obligations. In the US, it’s not convenient. The Lao-Cambodians in the US have too many obligations such as work and school. In addition, since the funeral lasts 7 to 14 days in the US, by the time the funeral service occurs the deceased’s spirit has already become aware that they have died.

The Lao-Cambodian practice of incorporating the Thai custom of having a 100 day observance was from the influence of the Thai Buddhist monks at their local temple. They saw it as something the deceased could benefit from, so the Lao-Cambodians did not see it as hurting the deceased.

**FUNERAL EXPENSES AND DONATIONS**

In this section, the traditional practice of the handling of the funeral expenses and donations will be detailed, followed by the changes that have occurred since the Lao-
Cambodian arrival to the United States. Subsequently, reasons for modifications to the funeral expenses and donation practices will be discussed.

**Traditional**

Traditionally, in Cambodia the funeral expenses were very low and the community donated food and money to the family of the deceased. The family of the deceased handled all the funeral arrangements. The family of the deceased (sometimes with the help of the community) built their own casket and did their own cremations and burials. Food costs were not expensive, as much of what they made came from their own farms. The community helped with the food costs because they donated rice and other goods. If they had any meat to eat, the butchering was done by the family of the deceased or with help from other community members.

The community donated money or food until the entire funeral service was over. This helped the family of the deceased with the expenses of the funeral, and was a practice showing community support. A few dollars were donated by each family. There would be a communal rice pot set outside the home where each person brought a bowl of rice and poured it in the large container. The rice was used to provide food for everyone that was coming to the house during the *boun*. The community donated what they had: incense, candles, food such as bamboo or fish sauce. It was extremely important to provide hospitality to people that came to pay respects to the deceased. Any money that was left over from the donations (once all costs were paid for) was donated to the temple, or saved for future observances for the deceased.

The donations were recorded, but this was not always practiced. The elders are usually the ones who are doing the record keeping, writing in Khmer or Thai. This was a less strenuous job, where the harder, manual work such as cooking or building the casket is left to the younger that are more physically capable. If someone donated to you and your family during a funeral or any observance, or if they came to your *boun* to help out or show face and support, it was expected that you do the same in return when a funeral (or any other observance) happened to their family. This was another way of helping each other out.
Modifications in the US

The practice of donations is a very important practice that was carried over from Cambodia, but it has undergone some changes in the US. In the US, money plays a much larger role in life than in the communities from which most Lao-Cambodians came from. The Lao-Cambodian funeral in the US has a great emphasis on money because of the high costs of the adoption of the Western funeral practices. The money from the donations is used to pay for all costs incurred during the funeral. The money in the US is needed to pay the costs for the food, miscellaneous items need for the funeral, donations to the Buddhist monks and costs to the funeral arrangements. Typically, the money is never used for personal gain, and the community usually benefits from the donations through the food provided for them when they attend the funeral. How much is donated by each family and how much the family has received in total donations is community knowledge.

Family and friends donate anywhere from $10 to a few thousand dollars. If the immediate family has money, they may choose to donate more [a few hundred dollars to a couple thousand dollars]. Friends who are close to the deceased may donate more than typical, anywhere from $50 to about $200. Otherwise, generally each person typically donates $10 to $40. If the deceased has family in another state, country, or city, the donations are gathered from the community there, and it are either sent with someone who is coming to the funeral or mailed to the family of the deceased. Some immediate family members may also donate large quantities of food and food supplies such as 20 pound bags of rice, fish sauce, padaak (pickled mudfish) or bulks of poultry or seafood. Some families have had to rely on one main person to pay the difference in the funeral expenses [offset from the donations from the community] if other immediate family members do not have the financial ability to help pay for the expenses.

The amount the deceased and their family receive in donations represents their relationship and participation in the community. If someone in the deceased’s family did a lot for the community, for example, is a community leader, other community members may tend to donate more to the family. In addition, if the deceased and their family attended other community members’ observances and donated to them, then others will do the same for the deceased and their family. Sometimes the deceased’s close family members donate a lot that adds to the overall donation amount, and sometimes the deceased’s close family members
cannot donate much at all. If one does not attend other people’s funeral or observance and donate to their *boun*, people are going to treat you the same way. Holly, 53, talks about her father-in-law and the small amount of donations he got overall. Her and her husband (his father) had to pay money out of their pocket to cover the funeral costs:

The children didn’t have much to donate. He also didn’t really like to go to other people’s houses. Sometimes if people came to the house, it was because [they] knew my husband (who went to everyone’s house and donated) and they would come. But my father-in-law, he didn’t really like to go to people houses. If he went, he only donated $10, $15 dollars. So they would give the same in return.

The practice of record keeping the donations is very important in America. The elders or community leader(s) writes in Khmer or Thai who donates what amount to the family, and the family keeps this record. If the community leader isn’t there to record who donated how much, it is recorded in English. When someone else in the community passes away, they can see if the family of the deceased donated to them and how much, so they can give that money in return. With some many people who donate, there is no way someone could memorize such detail unless they had a photographic memory. If someone passed away in the community, and they did not donate to you, it’s common to hear, “Oh, I’m not going to go to their funeral or donate because they did not come to my mother’s funeral.”

Some elders within the larger Southeast Asian community have developed a nonprofit community insurance pool. Any person can be a part of the low cost and effective funeral insurance. There is no monthly payment required, and no minimum payments needed. The people who sign up to the pool pay into it every time someone passes away. In one particular pool, everyone is required to pay $5. An individual can pay into the insurance pool and list a beneficiary, or a family member could pay into the pool on behalf of someone. If the person that paid into the pool died, the beneficiary has to provide proof of the death to the organizer of the community insurance pool. The organizer announces the death and everyone pays that is part of the community insurance. Once all the money is collected, it is sent to the family of the deceased person. This money goes towards the costs of the funeral. Holly also had to carry the burden of her mother-in-law’s funeral costs, but was partially relieved through the community insurance she paid into on behalf of her mother-in-law. Her mother-in-law also paid into a community insurance program in Long Beach where she was living:
No one in his immediate family donated money [for her funeral], except my husband and his older sister. When my mother-in-law died, she only had $63 in her pocket, only $63. For her, it was all me paying for her funeral. Luckily, she also paid into a community church pool for funerals. Anyone in the community could join. When someone would die, each person who was a part of the pool would donate $5. If 5 people died at the same time, you would have to pay $25. If no one died, you don’t pay. So she paid into that, and she also got $3,000 from her church funeral insurance. I also paid into an insurance pool with a Cambodian man out here in San Bernardino for her. With this grandpa, we have to pay $10. So if someone who paid into the pool died, everyone [who is] a part of the pool would have to pay.

Janae, 28, who was in a similar situation to Holly, had help for her father-in-law’s funeral through the community insurance pool. She describes:

It was a Cambodian church temple thing where he donated to every time someone died. I guess he used to do all kind of different things. He goes to church, he goes to the temple, he’s both, you know. But when he was living here still, before I met him, before me and my husband got married, he didn’t physically go to the person to pay into the insurance pool, but he would send money every month and when you pass away they give you back out and give the money back to you. That’s what he did. So he got back $5,000 on top of the $10,000 my mother-in-law brought.

The average costs in the Lao-Cambodian funeral in the US are now staggering. Some funerals have reached $20,000 in costs easily. The funeral in the US can last 7 to 14 days, so food and drink must be provided each day. Each day the Buddhist monks come and pray at the funeral, money is donated to them for their time. If Buddhist monks are brought in from farther temples, the expenses for their travel are higher. And, the family donates more money to the Buddhist monks on the day of the funeral service. There is also an increase in utility bills for the home for electricity, water, and trash detail because the utilities are being used for many more people 7 to 14 days straight. In addition to the Lao-Cambodian funeral, the family of the deceased has to pay for the Western funeral arrangements. The family of the deceased would not be able to maintain this if it were not for the donations made by the community. Nathan describes how much he received in contributions from his parents and what the expenses were like for the funeral:

I’m not sure the exact numbers unless I look at the book, but from my experience my father got $15,000, give or take, same as my mother, between $15,000 and $16,000 for all contributions. And then you subtract that money from buying the food, to buy what you need, that money is for the food. It has nothing to do with the service. We pay for our own services. Yes that’s just buying food. Maybe you are talking about left over money, $1,000, $2,000
dollars, just to help out for funeral service. The rest goes toward the food.
You’re feeding them for a whole week. Each day of the funeral you are
spending at least $300, $400 a day. Plus, you’re talking about $5,000,
$10,000 a week. If it’s two weeks, you are looking at $20,000. Depends on
how long the boun is.

Ricky’s funeral for his son that lasted two weeks echoes the same theme:

For my son here, it’s over $25,000. We got donation from people, $23,000.
The rest was from me. We spend about $13,000 on food. You spend over
$1,000 every day. The longer you have the body, the more expensive.
Sometimes the days are available and it’s just not the right day. They are full
over there [at the mortuary], so we have to wait. Some people have relatives
in another country, and we have to wait for them too.

**Reasons for Modification**

The modifications to the expenses and donations in the Lao-Cambodian funeral
developed out of their capitalist environment, the access to resources, assimilation of
Western funeral practices and the defiance of assimilation. The emphasis on the donation of
money and the development of their own community insurance pool developed out the high
costs of the US funeral. When accounting for all aspects of the Lao-Cambodian funeral: the
food, electricity and water costs to the home, renting large trash bins and high costs to the US
funeral (the use of the mortuary home, flowers, cost to the casket, burial, cremation,
purchasing a burial plot), money is needed to help pay all these expenses. In Cambodia, the
funeral did not last 7 to 14 days, but only 2 to 3 days, if that. The produce, meats and poultry
that was made for the community during the funeral in Cambodia was grown by the family
and others in the community, thus they did not have to purchase them from grocers. In
Cambodia, they did not have to pay for high costs of the funeral because there was not a
funeral industry in the area where most Lao-Cambodians lived. There were no utility or trash
disposal costs; some villages in Cambodia just got electricity as recent as 2010.

The expenses to the Lao-Cambodian funeral in the US are obscene compared to the
funeral expenses in Cambodia. The community must help with the expenses, which are
beyond an individual’s means. There is now a change emphasis on money for donations
instead of food. The increase in expenses is also due to the incorporation of the Western
funeral into their traditional funeral practices. The Lao-Cambodian community thought they
needed to assimilate into the US funeral customs in order to appear somewhat similar to the
majority; they feared the law and repercussions from society if they did not adopt the US
funeral customs. The Lao-Cambodians in the US pays for a funeral director and funeral home to arrange the Western funeral rather arrange the funeral on their own. Logistically, since the Lao-Cambodian funeral in the US is longer than the funeral in Cambodia, components to the funeral such as the food, utility bills, participation of the Buddhist monks, must be extended for the length of the funeral as well. There is no break in the funeral until it is completely over.

The emphasis on money also was cultivated by adopting the larger Western funeral culture due to perceived funeral regulations. The Lao-Cambodians use a funeral home and funeral director to assist in the funeral arrangements because they think they have to. Since they also incorporate American funeral practices into their practices, Luther, 76, states:

We have to help each other. Here, we cannot just leave the body anywhere like in Cambodia. We did not have to buy burial plots, or caskets. In Cambodia we made our own wooden caskets. We did not have to buy burial plots from anyone. That’s why we did not need a lot of money or a lot of food like here in America, plus we did not have a lot of money too. In America, you cannot not have any money. That is why we have to help each other with money. When I was doing the funeral for my son (in the 1990s), I did not get a lot of money like today. I got $4,000 for my son’s funeral from the outside community.

Sometimes even with the donations from the community and if the deceased and their family had money of their own, it was still not enough. There is the pressure from the community to be able to provide enough food and drink for the Buddhist monks and the guests, whether you had the money or not. Holly, 53, says:

It doesn’t matter if you had enough or not, you had to spend. When people come and help us, we had to take the donations out to pay for things. If it wasn’t enough, it came out of my pocket, you know. So I don’t know if I ever had money left over, I didn’t keep track. You always want to have enough for everyone. If you don’t, it’s very embarrassing, it is not nice if you don’t have food or something. It doesn’t look good. When people come, you have to provide for them. People talk, and they might say the baan boun didn’t have anything to eat, it was bad, and nothing was being done to help the situation. Our people sometimes like to talk, gossip.

In order to help alleviate some of the costs of the Southeast Asian funeral in the US, others developed their own insurance pool that anyone could become a part of. This community insurance pool did not make money off the participants, but rather provided a fair way of collecting money that went towards the deceased and their family members for funeral expenses. Indeed, the Southeast Asian community in the US has money compared to
living back home in their native land, but the group does not fare high on socioeconomic status compared to other Asian ethnic groups.

The practice of record keeping has also become vitally important in the US compared to life in Cambodia because of the increase in costs. This record book served as a point of reference to return the donations for future observances held by other members in the community. The some of the records are written in English because younger generations are not learning how to read and write in the traditional Thai or Khmer. There are also not any classes offered to learn to read or write in Thai or Khmer that are in a near city, unless one learns on their own, thus having to result to write the records English. There were classes offered at the temple in the early arrival of the Lao-Cambodian community in the 1990s, but this too died off for various reasons.

**CONCLUSION**

The Lao-Cambodian funeral in the US has stayed true to their religious beliefs, but since their arrival to the US, it has undergone some major changes. The modification of the Lao-Cambodian funeral in the US has changed due to coerced assimilation, the capitalist Western culture that forces and encourages assimilation and assimilation into pan-ethnic enclave. On the other hand, the Lao-Cambodians have resisted assimilation by keeping many of the traditions alive and developing their own systems within the funeral practice.

The Lao-Cambodians in the US have been coerced into assimilation through funeral regulations and *perceived* funeral regulations. In the US, individuals cannot cremate out in the open fields, or bury someone in the forest. In California specifically, a permit needs to be obtained if the body or ashes of the deceased is going to be buried somewhere else other than a cemetery. The Lao-Cambodians also believed they could not keep the deceased’s body in the home, when in fact this is not illegal. The Lao-Cambodians believed that if they did not arrange their funeral with a funeral home through a funeral director, they face consequences from the law or the government system. In fact, California does not require the use of a funeral director or funeral home to arrange a funeral in the US. An individual or family seeking individual service at a mortuary such as perhaps only purchasing for a cremation or burial should be able to arrange these services with a mortuary home. Whether the mortuary
home complies or not, and the how much they may charge for one service compared to a packaged service, is another story.

The modifications to the Lao-Cambodian funeral in the US have been effects by the capitalist Western culture that has coerced and encouraged assimilation. The Lao-Cambodians in the US have also assimilated into the Western funeral practices because of the commercialization of the funeral industry. This is similar to the experience of the Samoans in the US who are burying the deceased in the cemetery, rather on the property home like they did in American Samoa. The Lao-Cambodians now chose to purchase a casket and an urn for their deceased family members, compared to building their own casket like they did in Cambodia. It is not illegal in California to build your own casket; there are how to organizations, associations, books and websites that supports this effort.

What has also encouraged assimilation for the Lao-Cambodians living in the US capitalist economy is the availability of resources to food and money. This has affected the donation system, the food, and number of novice monks for the funeral practice. The emphasis on money donations instead of food donations for the funeral in the US is a direct link of the Lao-Cambodians having money compared to their life in Cambodia. The emphasis on food changed because the Lao-Cambodians have access to various kinds of food, from meats, seafood, to all kinds of produce they ate in Cambodia. In Cambodia, the community made food with whatever they had at the time of the funeral. The Lao-Cambodians has allowed for males to become novice monks for the deceased of all ages because they have access to purchase the monk cloths needed for the transformation. In Cambodia, the practice of becoming a novice monk was only limited to those who were about twenty years old and over and had a family.

The Lao-Cambodians have been coerced into assimilation because of their participation in the urban capitalist economy and distant geographical locations separating the community. The length of the funeral changing from 2 to 3 days to 7 to 14 days is a result of their participation in the US capitalist economy. Their work week only allows for free time on the weekends where the family of the deceased aims to have the funeral if possible. Distance from other Lao-Cambodians has also affected the length of the funeral. The family of the deceased has to make calls out to one or two people living further geographic locations, and they inform others in the community of the news. Combined with
the work week and the distance from other Lao-Cambodian communities, people have to plan everything out more such as buying plan tickets, carpooling, and getting the days off for the funeral. This is the same experience the Samoans funeral practice in the US has undergone. The Samoan’s traditional funeral occurred within 24 hours, but with the immigration to the US and the distance separating the community, this no longer happens.

The Lao-Cambodians has assimilated traditionally by the influence of media and the perceived US funeral customs. The practice of wearing black to the Lao-Cambodian funeral in the US, the reading of the biography of the deceased is conforming to what Gordon called Anglo-Saxon conformity. In Cambodia, the Lao-Cambodians wore the clothing they had. The Lao-Cambodians in the US have also defied the traditional notion of assimilation by assimilation into a pan-ethnic religious practice. The Lao-Cambodian funeral in the US adopted the Thai practice of having a 100 day observance after the funeral was over. Instead of assimilating into the majority group’s culture, they also were influenced by a minority group.

The one practice they have not continued to do is resuming the body of the deceased if they died from a bad death and were buried. This is a costly practice that most Lao-Cambodians cannot afford, and they have justified not practicing the resuming of the body because in the US, they believe the deceased is resting in a good place. The Lao-Cambodians, however, have kept many of their traditional funeral practices. The Lao-Cambodians have also developed new structures that defy assimilation. The Lao-Cambodians adapted to the costly Western funeral practices by developing their own nonprofit community insurance pool. This also reinforces community and their pan-ethnic ties. Similar to the Samoans in the US, the Lao-Cambodians are choosing to be buried among other Lao-Cambodians as well. This also way they maintain community in the afterlife. They have also adopted the religious practice of the 100 day observance after the funeral from the Thai in the US.

The Lao-Cambodians have also welcomed non Southeast Asians to become novice monks for the deceased. The Lao-Cambodians believe regardless of ethnicity, any male in the family can become a novice monk because it shows their love and support for the deceased. The Lao-Cambodians modifications to their funeral practice are similar to the Samoans in the US. Overall, they both continue to maintain their traditional funeral practices
while adapting some practices to their host country and assimilating to a few aspects of the Western funeral culture.
CHAPTER 5

CONCLUSION

Assimilation does not happen in a straight line and as “spontaneously” as Park suggests. When it happens, it’s not always for what the classic theorists claim. The Lao-Cambodians have assimilated traditionally, to become like Anglo-Saxons through the adoption of wearing black to the funeral and reading the biography of the deceased at the funeral service. They also use funeral homes, bury the body in cemeteries, buy caskets, and do no exhume the body for cremations years after burial. The Lao-Cambodians assimilated culturally to the Western funeral practices, as Gordon (1964) states. The Lao-Cambodians’ funeral modifications are similar to the Samoan’s funeral modification in the US.

However, they have also assimilated out of coercion and out of their participation in capitalism through the funeral regulations and perceived funeral regulations in the US. An individual cannot technically cremate a body on their own in the forest as the Lao-Cambodians did in Cambodia. California also does not require its citizens to arrange a funeral with a funeral director or to have the funeral service at the mortuary, yet Lao-Cambodians believe that they must use these services and so follow this practice. The community leaders are not informed about the US funeral context and laws, but only US traditions. Therefore, they buy caskets, bury at the cemetery, and do no exhume the body. Within this structure, they do however maintain many of their own practices in terms of community support, food, and religious practices with the role of the monks and the traditional prayers and parts of the ceremony.

The Lao-Cambodians also do not follow Park’s straight line assimilation into what Gordon called “Anglo Saxon” conformity. While they assimilate in some ways to the majority they also reinforce their pan-ethnic identity. They develop their own nonprofit community insurance pools. They also adopt the Thai custom of having an observance for the deceased 100 days after their funeral. The Thai in the US are not the majority, and yet ethnic groups still adopt each other’s customs and practices. Evidence of assimilation between minority groups rather than just the minority to the majority can also be found in
non Southeast Asians becoming novice monks for the deceased. This study shows how there were small instances of assimilation between subordinate groups, between the Lao-Cambodians and the Thai. This is similar to the Chinese in Chiang Mai, Thailand who have adopted some aspects of Theravada Buddhism into their funeral practices. The Chinese have the Buddhist monks come and pray at their funeral services and have also have novice monks incorporated into their funeral service. Park’s theory does not suggest how minority groups could adopt other minority group’s practices. This is also evidence that interethnic contact can produce a positive outcome (Barth and Noel, 1972), where Park (1950) believed in the literature review that interethnic contact will produce a negative outcome.

This paper also demonstrates that assimilation is not a straight forward process as Park’s (1950) classic model claims. Both Park’s and Gordon’s theories about assimilation are valuable because these are processes that occur within society. The Lao-Cambodians and other Southeast Asians in the US have formed their own sub societies within the dominant society and clearly show they can coexist within the dominant culture. In this case, the Lao-Cambodians have chosen to remain segregated. Their “assimilation” overall is an attempt to give a proper funeral for their loved one. Although the Lao-Cambodians are misinformed about the some US funeral regulations, they felt they had to conform to the Western funeral practices by having the funeral service at the mortuary, working with a funeral director to arrange the funeral, and by purchasing the casket and burial plots.

The traditional funeral practices are dependent on the elders, and it is unclear whether the traditions are being passed down or if it is the younger generation who are not concerned with the traditional practices. The funeral practices may disappear as younger generations continue to assimilate more and more into Western culture, without learning and understanding their ethnic heritage. A majority of my participants are in their 40s, 50s, and 60s. When the elders and older community leaders pass away, they fear they will not be given the same proper funeral as their parents are given. Betty, 65, says:

Yes, our parents taught us to do [the funeral] this way, so we’ve followed how our parents have done and taught us. But, when my generation is going to go, I don’t know what is going to happen.

Nathan, 44, also foresees what will happen in the future for the funeral practice in the US:

The elders, after they pass away, the Buddhists, will start to die out. Our religion is dying out here in America. But in our country, it’s still strong of course. Cause our children, do you think they would rather read the Koran or
an iPad? They would rather read their iPad. Let’s say, our grandfather died and our father all die out. Our religion, our culture will die out. Our generation will no longer know how to do the [funeral] service. We will do it, but we won’t pray.

The Lao-Cambodian community in southern California cannot depend on one community leader to help with the funeral practices in the three regions in which they live. Eventually, if we do not teach our children about the traditional culture while living away from our homeland, it will be lost. Institutional practices such as the males becoming novice monks that occur in the temple will remain funeral practice. On the other hand, traditions that are normally learned in the home, such as the cooking of traditional foods, will be lost. Currently, the community still gets to eat the food on a normal basis but this will fade. The first generation American born men and women are not seen cooking during the boun, but are taking care of other duties such as cleaning and running the logistical aspects of the funeral. The knowledge will remain in the hands of a few, and may lead to business opportunities for others during large, special events catering, curing the community’s taste buds.

The Lao-Cambodians do exhibit a similar experience as the Samoans in the US with their funeral practices. Although they immigrated to the US for different reasons, their cultures are similar and have remained overall the same as their native country. Their religion and community affairs are central to their everyday lives, they continue to maintain loyalty to others in their ethnic group, even if there are varying degrees of separation (geographically and socially), they are expected to assimilate into Western culture, live in large ethnic enclaves, have rural backgrounds, and their physically “dark skin” and native language are unacceptable in their new home. The Lao-Cambodians have the larger Western funeral practices to appear as a non-threatening group to society, but at the core, remains their traditional funeral practices that are maintained abroad.

The Samoans in the US and Lao-Cambodians have modified and changed their traditional funeral practices because they felt pressure to adopt Western funeral practices. The Samoans in the US and the Lao-Cambodians also adapted to the modernization in their new environment. The Samoan and Lao-Cambodian communities modified their funeral practices out of necessity. Living further away from others in their community in the US compared to living in close native village settings also impacted the Samoans in the US and
the Lao-Cambodian’s funeral practices. At the core of the Samoan and the Lao-Cambodians’
funeral are their traditional practices that are carried over from their native country.

Future research should investigate how the capitalist economy influences an
immigrant group’s cultural practices. Does it cause them to spend more money in their
cultural practices? Does the availability of various items cause excess consumption in which
the community has to keep up with? How will it affect the future of the donation system in
the Lao-Cambodian community? In addition, future studies in the funeral practices of the
Lao-Cambodians should research gender roles and sexism that exists in the funeral practices.
Women are not allowed to become novice monks when someone in their family dies. In the
US particularly, few women are even aware that they can become novice monks, but not to
the same degree and form as male. Does this practice continue to create submissive women
in the culture? What message does this send to the community at large? What are the
reasons for keeping women from participating in this practice? These are some of the
questions that should be addressed on behalf of women’s rights.

I hope this paper continues to encourage discourse and dialogue about assimilation
and they ways it continues to shape the communities and cultures surrounding us. More so, I
hope it cultivates ideas and practices in which ethnic groups who feel inferior can find ways
to continue to maintain, improvise and develop their own practices within a dominant culture
as the Southeast Asians have with their funeral practices in the US.
REFERENCES


APPENDIX A

FUNERAL PARTICIPANT CRITERIA SHEET
FUNERAL PARTICIPANT CRITERIA SHEET

Interview Code ____

1. Are you 18 and over?
   
   Yes  No
   ☐  ☐

2. Have you either:
   
   Yes  No
   ☐  ☐
   a. Arranged a funeral for a loved one or someone?
   ☐  ☐
   b. Currently or have been a funeral director
   ☐  ☐
   c. Officiated at a funeral
   ☐  ☐

3. Are you
   
   a. Cambodian  ☐
   b. Lao  ☐
   c. Thai  ☐
   d. Other ________________
APPENDIX B

FUNERAL PARTICIPANT INTERVIEW GUIDE
FUNERAL PARTICIPANT INTERVIEW GUIDE

Interview Code _____
Community leader_____  
Family member_____  

1. What is your gender?  Female  Male  
☐  ☐

2. What is your age?  

3. What is your religion?  
☐ Buddhism  
☐ Christianity  
☐ Islam  
☐ Hinduism  
☐ Nonreligious  
☐ Other _______________________

4. What is your current occupation?  

5. Where were you born?  

   a. If you immigrated, at what age?  

   b. Why did you immigrate?  

6. Where do you currently live? _____________________________________________

7. Who did you arrange a funeral for?  
   □ Son  
   □ Daughter  
   □ Brother  
   □ Sister  
   □ Mother  
   □ Father  
   □ Grandmother  
   □ Grandfather  
   □ Community member  
   □ Other _____________________

   a. If you are a community leader, how do you know this person?  
      ______________________________________________________________
      ______________________________________________________________
      ______________________________________________________________

8. When did this person die? _____________________________________________

9. Where was the deceased born? _________________________________________

   a. If the deceased immigrated, how old were they? ________________________

   b. Why did the deceased immigrate?
10. Where did the deceased live before their passing? __________________________

11. What was the deceased person’s religion?
   □ Buddhism
   □ Christianity
   □ Islam
   □ Hinduism
   □ Nonreligious
   □ Other ___________________

   a. How long has the deceased been practicing this religion? ________________

   b. Did the deceased convert to a different religion since immigrating to the United States? If yes, which religion? ______________________________

   c. If the deceased did convert religions, what kind of funeral service was the deceased given? ______________________________

11. How old was the deceased person? __________________________

12. What was their cause of death? ______________________________
13. When did the funeral take place? ______________________________

14. Where did the funeral take place? ______________________________

15. How many days did the funeral last? ____________________________

*If a person is not a community leader, please skip questions 15 and 16.*

15. How long have you been officiating funerals? ______________________________

16. How many times have you arranged a funeral for someone? _________________
APPENDIX C

INTERVIEW GUIDE
1. Please tell me about the death of the person you arranged the funeral for.
   a. What happened to the body after the person died?
   b. Was it taken by the coroner’s office or did the body remain in the home?
   c. If the death was due to natural causes, was the family surrounding this person before he or she passed away?

2. Please describe the funeral ceremony.
   a. [Community leader only] How did you become a leader in officiating funerals?
   b. Who did you learn this from?
   c. Where did you learn it at?
   d. Are there specific rituals that must be done for the funeral?
   e. Is there a wake or a viewing for the deceased?
   f. Where does this occur at?
      i. If so, who attends the viewing or wake?
      ii. Does any particular ritual occur?
      iii. How long does this last?
   g. How long does the funeral ceremony last?
   h. Are small flower bouquets made for guests?
      i. Is anything provided for the guests?
   i. What happens in the funereal ceremony, from beginning to the end?

3. What was done with the body?
   a. Can you tell me about the journey of the body after this person died?
   b. What was the cause of death?
   c. Were there any religious rituals or prayers prior to this person passing?
d. What does the mortuary do to prepare the body?

e. Was the body cremated or buried? Why?

f. Was a casket purchased?

g. Do mourners give anything to the deceased before they are buried or cremated? If so, what are these things? Why do they do this?

h. Is the body or ashes buried on the same day of the funeral ceremony?

i. If not, who attends the burial of the ashes or body?

j. Why is it done on a different day from the funeral ceremony?

4. **Tell me about the funeral location?**

   a. How long did the funeral last? Why did it occur over the number of days?

   b. Why was the funeral at this particular location?

   c. Is the location set up in a particular way for the funeral?

      i. If so, why?

   d. How is the day of the funeral ceremony, and burial or cremation chosen?

   e. Is the funeral ceremony held at a mortuary?

   f. If so, what is the set up like in the mortuary room?

   g. Do certain persons sit in specified areas?

   h. After the funeral ceremony, does the community return for a reception at the funeral house?

5. **Tell me about who gathered and what they did? Tell me about the donations?**

   a. Were there donations made for this person?

   b. How and who organizes the collection of the donations?

   c. How long does the donation take place?

   d. What do the donations go towards?

   e. Does the total sum of the donations signify anything?

   f. What happens to the donations after the funeral?

   g. Do certain persons donate more than others?

   h. When does the community come to the funeral location?

   i. What does the community do when they come to the funeral location?

   j. Are there certain roles certain groups play?

   k. What times does the community start arriving?
1. When does the community stop visiting?

6. **Tell me about the participation of the Buddhist Monks [if deceased person was Buddhist or given a Buddhist funeral]?**
   a. At what point do the Buddhist monks participate in the funeral?
   b. How many attend?
      i. Is the number of Buddhist monks present signifying anything?
   c. What times of the day do the Buddhist monks come?
      i. Why at these times?
   d. What happens when the Buddhist monks arrive?
   e. How are persons selected to become a temporary Buddhist monk in honor of the deceased?
   f. Why is this a part of the funeral ritual?
   g. What is the process for these persons to become Buddhist monks?
   h. How long are they required to be temporary Buddhist monks?
   i. Are these persons treated the same as the permanent Buddhist monks?
   j. If there are any differences, what are they?
   k. Do some stay beyond the required time?
      i. Why? Does this symbolize something if they extend their stay?
   l. What roles do all the Buddhist monks play in the funeral ceremony?

7. **Tell me about the funeral, if the deceased was given a non Buddhist funeral ceremony?**
   a. What religious ceremony was it?
   b. Who made this decision?
   c. Was this what the deceased wanted?
   d. Were there any traditional Southeast Asian influences in the funeral ritual?

8. **Tell me about your religion?**
   a. Is your religion different from the deceased?
   b. If yes, was this a conflict in you being the main person that arranged the funeral?
   c. Does the entire family belong to the same religious group?
   d. If yes, did this change their participation in the funeral?
e. Did the deceased convert to a different religion if they immigrated to the United States?
   i. Why?

9. Tell me about what the family does during the funeral?
   a. How did you become the main person in arranging the funeral?
   b. What roles does the family play in the entire length of the funeral (if there was a wake, funeral ceremony, and cremation/burial)?
   c. Do they make donations for the deceased?
   d. How involved is the family in making decisions for the deceased and the funeral?
   e. Was there someone outside the family helping you make funeral arrangements?

10. Tell me how the funeral was different here then it would have been in Cambodia/Thailand/Laos?