During the Vietnam War, the United States secretly recruited thousands of people in Southeast Asia, including Laos, to support the war against the Communists and North Vietnamese. In the mid-1970s, when the United States pulled out of these countries, many of these people fled the country, leading their families on long and dangerous treks to refugee camps in Thailand and other countries, then later to the United States.

Most Laotian refugees originally were settled in California. Later many Laotians moved to other areas of the country, including North Carolina, to settle. There are currently about 1,000 Laotians in Guilford County.

• Many initial refugees from Laos were military officers or business people who had been associated with U.S. interests during the period of the Royal Lao government before it fell to the communists at the end of the Vietnam war.

• Laos also has many hilltribe people with different cultures and languages. One of the most common hilltribe populations that has resettled in the United States is the Hmong.

• A large population of Laotian and Hmong refugees live in North Carolina, particularly the western part of the state which has a geography and climate similar to their homeland.

• North Carolina is the fourth largest settlement of Laotian refugees in the United States.

LAOTIANS

Did You Know?

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Information included here is provided to help you become more aware of the culture and traditions of your clients, students and co-workers. Please use this only as a guide, keeping in mind that all people within a culture are not the same. Be sure to ask your clients and their families about their specific beliefs, practices and customs. Showing respect and openness toward their traditions will help you build better relationships and provide more effective services.
LANGUAGE Lao or Laotian is the official language of Laos, although many different dialects are spoken there. In Guilford County, younger or second generation Laotians usually speak English, but most Laotians over age 40 have limited English skills. Many Laotians who came to this country could not read or write, and this is still true of older Laotians.

RELIGIOUS PRACTICES & BELIEFS Buddhism is the primary religious practice. Many Laotians are affiliated with the Greensboro Buddhist Center, which was originally established to serve the Cambodian population. Since there was no other temple at that time, it began to serve a broader population of people from Southeast Asia. This temple serves as a spiritual and social center for many Southeast Asians.

A small independent temple, the Lao Emerald Buddha Temple, has now been established in High Point specifically to meet the more traditional practices of Laotians. A few Laotians have become associated with Christian churches. For example, the First Wesleyan Church in High Point offers space in their church for Laotians to worship.

SOCIAL CLASSES In Laos, social class is very important. It is the primary determinant of the level of education you will receive, the kind of work you will do, and the people in your social group. In general, Laotian refugees who came to the Triad had high educational levels. As a result, some of them have been more successful at establishing businesses and moving into the middle class, compared with other refugee populations who have remained primarily working class.

Mixed class marriages are rare and frowned upon. In Laos, the families often arrange marriages, but that is not common here. Still, few Laotians marry outside their ethnic group. According to some Laotian professional women working in the United States, most Laotian males think women in this country are headstrong and too independent.

EDUCATION Among Laotians, as for many other cultures, education is the primary opportunity for a person coming from a poor family to find a chance to move up in life. Laotian parents who have settled in this country want their children to be educated and, if attempts are made to involve them, they will usually support teachers in their efforts to help their children. The first generation of Laotians settled here was unlikely to be assertive in approaching teachers about their children’s problems or needs because of their traditional respect for persons in positions of authority. Younger or more professional Laotians are more likely to be involved in their children’s schooling.

EMPLOYMENT Many initial refugees from Laos were military officers or business people who had been associated with U.S. interests during the period of the Royal Lao government, so they tended to be more highly educated than other Southeast Asian refugees. Here, however, because of language and cultural barriers, they often wound up in entry-level jobs. There has been considerable entrepreneurial interest in this community, however, and a number of Laotian refugees have developed small businesses.

Few Laotians who have resettled in this area have professional-level jobs. Many work in the furniture or textile industries or in machine shops, doing production work or other manual labor jobs. The current economic climate, which has led to many recent plant closings, has also significantly influenced the availability of these jobs.
TIME ORIENTATION  Laotians who have been in this country for a while are usually conscious of “American time” and make an effort to be on time for appointments and other events. Within their own community, however, Laotians do not generally share the Western concept of time. When invited to a social event, they may show up later than expected. When inviting people to their homes, they may say, “come by to eat,” without stating what time to arrive.

FOOD & DIET  Most Laotians eat rice or noodles daily, particularly “sticky rice.” Laotians eat a variety of fruits and vegetables, especially green leafy vegetables. They also eat meat of most kinds, such as beef, pork, fish or chicken; however, these are usually served in smaller portions and often mixed in a vegetable dish.

CONFLICT RESOLUTION  Laotians in general prefer to avoid conflict and are unlikely to show signs of anger even when displeased or annoyed. If they are not satisfied with the services they receive, they are more likely just to go somewhere else than to complain. When asked a question or given a direction to follow, they may say “yes” even if they really mean “no.” When trying to determine whether clients are agreeing to a treatment protocol, it is helpful to use open-ended questions that cannot be answered with yes or no in order to get a more accurate answer.

GREETINGS & SHOWING RESPECT  One of the most important things a person can offer a Laotian is respect, which can be shown by being polite, courteous, friendly, and having good manners.

FAMILY & RELATIONSHIPS  For Laotians, both here and in Laos, family relationships are very important. Large extended families often live in the same house. Parents teach their children the importance of the family sticking together through thick and thin. There is a Laotian saying, “A knife cannot cut water into pieces.” This means that regardless of what happens, a family cannot be separated.

GENDER ROLES  In Laos, men are expected to be in charge of providing for their family, and they usually have much influence on major family decisions. Women are expected to care for the needs of the family. In the United States, where women have obtained higher levels of education and often work outside the home, they also have influence in the home.

CHILDREN & YOUTH  In Laos, children are expected to contribute to the family by participating in cooking, cleaning and other household chores. Here, while these duties are still encouraged, there is more focus on the children’s education. Parents work hard to meet their children’s needs and to provide them with the opportunities they did not have.

Laotians consider physical punishment, such as spanking, an acceptable discipline for children. Those who have settled here have learned that only mild spanking is acceptable, not harsh discipline. They are likely to use other forms of discipline when taught, such as “time out” or sending a disobedient child to sit in a corner.
In greetings, Laotians usually address others according to their age and family status. For example, if the person being addressed is about the same age as one’s uncle, one may call him uncle even if there is no family relationship. The same is true for other relationships, such as older sister, brother, mother, and so forth. Laotians do not usually call others by their given names. This is to show that they respect the person and treat him or her as they would one of their family members. This can lead to confusion about relationships when providing services.

In health care settings, it is considered more respectful to address adults as Mr. or Mrs. than to call them by their first names.

**GESTURES & CUSTOMS**

Gestures and body language are based on showing respect also. For example, Laotians will lower their body with a slight bow when passing older people. Men may greet another man by shaking his hand, but greet a woman by placing both hands in a praying position at neck level, bowing down and saying hello or “sa bai dee.” Women generally greet both men and other women by placing their hands in this same praying position and bowing.

In Buddhism, the head or highest part of the body is considered sacred. It is thought to be offensive and rude to touch the head of another person without their permission, particularly a person older than you. In contrast, the feet are considered to be the lowest form of the body. It is disrespectful to use your feet to point at anything or anyone. It is considered rude to step over any part of the body of another person, such as their legs. Do not use your index finger to call people.

Many other customs can be determined just by observing and following Laotian behavior. For example, it is customary to remove your shoes before entering a Laotian home.

**HEALTH & WELLNESS**

**HEALTH BELIEFS** Traditionally, many Laotians attribute sickness to the loss of one of the 32 spirits or “souls” which they believe inhabit the body and contribute to maintaining health. This loss of a spirit may be due to any number of factors, including having an accident or becoming startled or frightened. Because of this, traditional treatments are more likely to be tried first. These may include various procedures or herbal treatments, or a ceremony to call back the soul, which is performed by an elder or healer.

Laotians who have become associated with Christian churches may not hold to these traditional views. They are more likely to accept the Christian belief of “one soul” within an individual rather than many souls or spirits.

**MENTAL HEALTH**

Mental illness is attributed to spirit loss. In Laos, if a person exhibits symptoms that we may think of as mental illness, such as hallucinations, they will simply be left alone as long as they are not dangerous to others. If they consider mental health a problem, they are more likely to go to a monk for a ceremony to treat it.

Here in the United States, some Laotians have learned about the value of treatment for mental health problems and will accept help. They are not likely to understand, however, why some medications have side effects that sometimes make a person feel worse. Laotians are not likely to seek treatment from a traditional mental health source unless there is a long-standing or very serious problem, or unless specifically referred for treatment. Laotians do not generally value counseling and are more likely to want some specific procedure.
OBSTACLES TO HEALTH CARE
The language barrier is an issue, particularly for older Laotians. Even with those who speak English or have access to an interpreter, it may be difficult to get an accurate health history because that information is considered very private. This is particularly true of any information related to sexual problems or behavior.

Financial problems may be barriers as well, particularly since many Laotians work in jobs where they do not have health insurance. Some Laotians, with refugee status, may be eligible for Medicaid or other services if their income is low enough. However, Laotians may frown upon persons who accept these services if they are perceived to be able to work and help themselves.

Transportation is often cited as a problem, particularly for those who have only one car in the family or when that car is needed to get to work. Even when a person is sick and wants to get health care, it is a problem when all adults in the family work and cannot afford to take time off from work to take the sick family member to appointments.

OUTREACH TIPS
• Preventive health care is not a norm with most Laotians, other than childhood immunizations. To encourage Laotians to seek health care, it is important to use patience and consistency to educate them about the importance of care.
• Use dramatic pictures to help explain the consequences of not getting regular health care or treatments.
• When prescribing treatment, use basic English to write out simple instructions and medical terminology so patients can take it with them to help them remember. Even if they cannot read themselves, they are likely to get someone else to translate it for them.
• For promoting any kind of services, word of mouth from other people in the community is the best form of communication.

LAOTIAN-OWNED BUSINESSES
Asian Market
2931 E. Kivett Dr.
High Point, NC 27260

Pakse Cafe
827 W. Florida St.
Greensboro, NC 27406

Phonesavanh
Oriental Food Market
1810 Coliseum Blvd.
Greensboro, NC 27403

Bangkok Cafe Restaurant
1203 S. Holden Rd.
Greensboro, NC 27407

Chan’s Auto Repair
4610 High Point Rd.
Greensboro, NC 27403

Night Bright Cafe
2625 S. Main St.
High Point, NC 27260

Quick Way
2651 Randleman Rd.
Greensboro, NC 27406

ALOUNEMAY
Oriental Food Store
3136 E. Kivett Dr., Suite 112
High Point, NC 27260
**PRIMARY RESEARCHER**

Khouan Maoxomphu of UNCG Center for New North Carolinians

**CONTRIBUTORS & SOURCES OF INFORMATION**

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Inthisane, Inthava, Phomma and Tadam Khounsavanh, Khamsene Manivanh, Khamsing and Sone Mixaykham, and Ounheuane Vannachith (Personal Interviews, 25 March 2001)

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**HOLIDAYS & CELEBRATIONS**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>EVENT</th>
<th>DATE</th>
<th>DESCRIPTION</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Songkran Day</td>
<td>April</td>
<td>Traditional Festival Southeast Asian New Year</td>
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<tr>
<td>Visakha Puja</td>
<td>May</td>
<td>The Day of Birth, Day of Enlightenment, and Death of The Buddha</td>
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<tr>
<td>Atthamee Puja</td>
<td>May</td>
<td>The Day of Cremation of The Buddha’s Body</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sard Festivals</td>
<td>June</td>
<td>Merit Making Transference (1st and 2nd events)</td>
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<tr>
<td>Kathin Ceremony</td>
<td>October</td>
<td>The Ceremony of Presentation of The Yellow Robe to Buddhist Monks</td>
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*Please note: the actual dates of events change according to the lunar calendar*. 

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**PLACES OF WORSHIP**

**Greensboro Buddhist Center**

2715 Liberty Road
Greensboro, NC 27406

**LAO First Wesleyan Church**

1915 N. Centennial Street
High Point, NC 27262

**Lao Emerald Buddha Temple**

1635 Kersey Valley Rd.
High Point, NC 27263

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**ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS**

Daophone & Keo Oriental Grocery
2601 High Point Rd.
Greensboro, NC 27407

S.K. Auto Service and Mufflers
3502 E. Kivett Drive
High Point, NC 27260

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