

Integrating into a Mosaic Society: The Laotian Refugees in Calgary

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Integration without cultural destruction is the significant feature of the Canadian ideology of multiculturalism. From 1975 to 1980, a number of Laotian refugees left their country and came to Calgary, Alberta, Canada, because of the war in Laos. This research focused on the Laotian refugees and their integration into Calgary society utilizing a phenomenological approach.

Ten Laotian participants were interviewed independently in this qualitative research. They fared well economically. They were satisfied with working and living in Calgary. Freedom was the main cause of their satisfaction. Others were the quality of life, the high standard of sanitation, the high technology, the better educational system, and the Canadian acceptance of ethnic diversity.

They had high ethnic identification. Multiculturalism supported the maintenance of their cultural values. Their freedom and rights were protected. They however remained distant from the local community. Because of their weak relationship with the society at large, they did not integrate well. They could not balance their ethnic identity and their relationship with society. Improving of their English skills and upgrading of their employment status would enhance their integration by giving them more opportunities to interact with the local community.

1. Introduction

This study, "Integrating into a Mosaic Society: The Laotian Refugees in Calgary," arose from personal interest and concern for the adjustment of the refugees to an extremely different environment. In 1980,

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the researcher as a social worker worked with Cambodian refugees in Sakaew Holding Center in Prachinburi Province, Thailand. Although the researcher had little time working with them, their plight aroused his compassion.

Thailand did not sign the 1951 Geneva Convention and Protocol relating to the Status of Refugees. As a result, Thailand is not obliged to let Indochinese refugees resettle in her territory. The Thai Government recognized them as “displaced persons from Indochina,” which means that they illegally crossed the Thai border (Chantavanich, 1988, p. 5). These displaced persons were supervised at various holding centers in Thailand. The Western world played a significant role as third countries for the resettlement of the Indochinese refugees.

The researcher knew that the refugees had completely different backgrounds from the people of the third countries, mostly in the Western world, where they had to resettle. Because they were uprooted from their original country and forced into an alien environment, the researcher wondered whether they could survive. When the researcher went to study for a Ph.D. at the University of Calgary in 1995, he met a number of Laotians in church, in Buddhist temples, and at Thai and Lao festivals. The Thai and Lao dialects are very similar, something like the differences in speech of Australians and Americans. Thais who live in the sixteen provinces of the Northeastern (or **E-San**) region of Thailand use the same Lao language. These **E-San** Thais also call themselves Lao. Laotians and **E-San** Thais communicate with each other without any translation. The researcher used to work as a community organizer in the Northeast of Thailand, so he understands Lao very well. He moves easily among the Laotians of Calgary. Knowing local Laotians aroused the researcher’s curiosity to understand more of their adjustment to living in Calgary.

2. The Study

The purpose of the study was to conduct preliminary and exploratory research in order to investigate the integration of Laotian refugees in Calgary. The research participants were all refugees who left Laos from 1975 to 1980 and came to Canada because of the war in Laos. The goal of the research was to discover how Laotian refugees manage to balance their cultural identity and positive relationships with the rest of the local Canadian community in Calgary. This research also included questions about how they function in managing their own distinct ethnic organization.

Five Laotian couples were the subjects of this study. Each of the subjects was interviewed individually. The researcher did not interview a couple together because one spouse's idea might influence the other. Particularly in Lao culture, a wife with her husband, when speaking to people outside the family, often allows her husband to lead the conversation. In public, a Laotian wife generally follows her husband's idea even though she may inwardly disagree with it. In order to collect the exact ideas from each participant without interference from the spouse, the researcher conducted individual interviews with each participant.

3. Canada: A Mosaic Society

Canada was among five countries admitting the greatest number of Indochinese refugees during 1975-1985. The other four were the United States, the People's Republic of China, France and Australia (Hawkins, 1991). Canada was also among the countries that contributed the greatest per capita donations to international refugee aid agencies. Canadian social policy toward Indochinese refugees is relevant to her unique ideology of multiculturalism. This policy attempts to encourage establishment of a society directed by equality of access and opportunity, and equal participation in the social, political, and economic life of the nation.

The Canadian approach to multiculturalism is different from the Americans'. America has been described as a **melting pot**, whereas Canada has been termed a **mosaic** (Weinfeld, 1988). According to the melting pot image of the US, immigrants are encouraged to give up their original cultures and become full and equal American citizens, sharing in the opportunities offered in American society. Canada, by contrast, is a mosaic in which immigrants are encouraged to retain their cultures and identities. Canada is well recognized as a leader in developing its unique concept of a "Mosaic Society."

Approximately 500 Laotians live in Calgary (B. Borihan, personal communication, January 12, 1997, and March 5, 1997). Thus Laotians form a very small part of the population in Calgary, especially if press reports of 400 people being added to the city per week are true. The Laotian group is but a sliver in the great mosaic piece. However, since such a small group could be easily ignored or overwhelmed, they constitute a great test of Canadian adherence to policy. Given such a small group, how well is the Canadian ideal of integrating various ethnic groups being applied? How do these Laotian refugees experience integration into Canadian society? Given that integration without cultural destruction is the essence of the Canadian mosaic, are these Laotian refugees able to maintain their cultural values? Do they lose their cultural identity?

4. Laotian Refugees

In this research, "Laotian refugees" refers to people who were born in Laos but left the country from 1975 to 1980 because of a war wider than the Vietnam War. It is fundamentally important to have an appropriate understanding of their unique cultural systems, especially if one is to encourage and assist them to integrate into Canada's multicultural society.

The difference between the cultural values of Laotians and those

of mainstream Canadians is extreme. Laotian characteristics include manifesting conspicuous politeness, meekness, passiveness, tolerance for others and non-confrontational silence (Royle, 1980). Such noticeable characteristics may be misunderstood and may bring adverse consequences to them when they have to compete in the society at large. A Laotian family is typically large and extended. Above all, the family is the most important social unit. However, when the refugees arrived in a new country, many were without their families. Theravada Buddhism is the official religion of the Laotian state. In 1975, the literacy rate of Laotians was so low that only 25 percent of the population was literate (Wodarski, 1992). Relations between male and female Laotians are relatively egalitarian when compared with the better known male-dominant societies in Asia, such as China and Japan (Rynearson, and DeVoe, 1984 cited in Wodarski, 1992).

As of late 1988, there were 19,004 lowland and 58,314 hill tribe Laotian refugees in Thailand, the sole country of first asylum for Laotian refugees (Sutter, 1990, p. 115). Between 1975 and December 1986, statistics from the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) show that 229,849 Laotians (156,708 lowland Lao and 73,141 Hmong or hill tribe Lao) departed from refugee camps in Thailand. They came to more than 18 host countries, i.e., the United States, France, Canada, Australia, the Federal Republic of Germany, New Zealand, China, Switzerland, Belgium, Japan, Argentina, the United Kingdom, Italy, the Netherlands, Austria, Norway, Spain, Sweden, and others (UNHCR, 1986 cited in Pongsapich, and Chongwatana, 1988, p. 17). In this period of time, Canada received 13,651 Laotian refugees (12,793 lowland Lao and 858 Hmong or hill tribe Lao) from refugee camps in Thailand (UNHCR, 1986 cited in Pongsapich, and Chongwatana, 1988, p. 17).

Among the five ethnic groups of Indochinese refugees, Laotian refugees were from both urban middle-class and rural backgrounds.

Sutter (1990, p. 75) believes that the majority of the educated middle class fled from Laos because of dire economic hardship and fear of political victimization (Wurfel, 1980). Since the Pathet Lao Communists took control on December 2, 1975, about 360,000 Laotian refugees, representing one-tenth of the total population, escaped to Thailand (Sutter, 1990, p. 72). They were confined in camps and had no control over their own lives, but were dependent for assistance from international and other voluntary agencies or Volags (Neuwirth and Rogge, 1988).

Family, kin, and community are of prime importance for all Indochinese refugees (Dorais, 1991; Kibria, 1993; Menjivar, 1995; Tran, 1986). The Lao community has spread to many provinces of Canada. In Winnipeg, for example, Laotian refugees mingle among the other ethnic groups of Southeast Asia. In Manitoba, the Lao Women's Association, the Lao Association, the Lao-Canadian Education and Culture Center, and the Manitoba Laotian and Intercultural Association are organizations which have been established to benefit Laotians. In Toronto, the Lao Association founded in 1979 became the Lao Association of Ontario (LAO) in 1980 (Van Esterik and Van Esterik, 1988). The leaders of LAO are concerned about a number of problems in the community, such as the tendency of their youths and teenagers to reject their ancestry.

The Laotians in Calgary naturally assemble together in housing and the workplace. They either live together in close locations around the southeast and the northeast or work in the same firms. One of the committee members of the Calgary-Lao Association said he worked in a food company with other 60 Laotians (Kooprasert, personal communication, March 5, 1997). There are also concentrations of Laotians in furniture factories and paper box firms. The Laotians in Calgary were rarely unemployed because they helped their friends to find jobs and they never refused jobs. According to four leaders in the CLA, even though the Laotians in Calgary number more than the Thais, they have no temple

for practicing their Buddhism, but have to go to the Thai temple.

5. Acculturation

There are several terms that refer to the process by which Indochinese refugees are incorporated into Canadian society. Acculturation is a complex phenomenon that requires the contact of at least two autonomous cultural groups resulting in an adjustment in at least one of the two groups to the other (Berry, 1980; Grant and Ladson-Billings, 1997). It can happen through trade, invasion, enslavement, educational or missionary activity, or telecommunications. The least acculturation may occur in cases where the contact is incidental and unintentional as in trade; or where it is completed within a short period of time. The greatest may happen when there is an invasion, the intention of changing the beliefs of others, an increase in educational level and skills, or a long period of settlement.

Berry discussed the varieties of acculturation by giving dichotomous “yes” or “no” answers to two questions posed to groups and individuals: (1) Have they retained their cultural identity? and (2) Do they have a positive relationship with the dominant society? Berry found four distinct categories of acculturation; assimilation, integration, rejection, and deculturation.

Table 1. Dichotomous Answers to Questions of Acculturation.

Varieties of Acculturation	Retention of Cultural Identity?	Positive Relationship to Dominant Society?
Assimilation	No	Yes
Integration	Yes	Yes
Rejection	Yes	No
Deculturation	No	No

Source: Berry, 1980, p. 14.

Therefore, integration implies the groups' and individuals' decision to retain considerable elements of their original culture as well as the movement to become an integral part of the dominant society.

6. Integration

There is no universally accepted criterion to measure integration, nor to define what successful integration requires. Dorais (1991) defined "economic integration" as the level and type of participation of the Indochinese refugees in the local labor market that can be determined by examining two factors: (1) ratio of employed vs. unemployed individuals among the adult population and (2) equivalence between jobs held in the country of origin and the country of adoption. Kuhlman (1991, cited in Potocky, 1996, p. 245) regarded integration as a process and outcome which affected and is affected by both the refugees and the host society. According to Kuhlman, refugee economic integration is determined by four criteria: (1) adequate participation in the economy; (2) an income that ensures an acceptable standard of living; (3) access equal to that of the host population to those goods and services to which access is not determined solely by income levels; (4) the impact of refugees on the host society having been such that, on balance, the position of the various socioeconomic categories within the indigenous population with respect to criteria 1, 2 and 3 has not deteriorated.

Dorais (1991) disagreed with some authors' position that cultural adaptation is the same as assimilation. The term "cultural assimilation" is often used in a way that misses the distinction (Friesen, and Boberg, 1990, p. 125). Cultural assimilation is the process by which the dominant culture attaches minor cultures as branches on its family tree. The process of cultural assimilation may proceed intentionally, indirectly, gradually, or even involuntarily. Dorais (1991) defined adaptation as "the possibility to express adequately one's own social and

cultural needs within a specific environment” (p. 567). It is therefore unnecessary for any refugee to adjust to a new society by discarding his previous beliefs and way of life.

This author strongly agrees with the large volume of literature that considers that integration is not the same as assimilation. Refugees need not discard their cultural beliefs and values in order to integrate into a new society—especially in Canada, where multiculturalism has been increasingly embraced by the nation. On the other hand, integration does not mean that refugees should participate in and enjoy their social life only within their own ethnic groups while isolating themselves from the host society. Therefore, real integration is not framed as choosing only one cultural system, (i.e. between Canadian culture or the original culture) but involves balancing one’s own ethnic cultural system with those of the host society.

Dorais (1991) focused on how the Vietnamese, Cambodians and Laotians in Quebec City, in spite of their small numbers, organized their three distinct and viable ethnic communities. Dorais conducted a qualitative study of community organizations, and used statistics from secondary data sources. She found that most of the Vietnamese were professionals or civil servants (27 percent), traders and sale persons (14.5 percent), or not in the labor force (25.7 percent; mostly housewives), while half of the Cambodians were agricultural workers (54.8 percent). Most Laotians were either civil servants (20.6 percent), business persons (23.5 percent) or service employees (29.4 percent). Vietnamese occupations in Quebec City are similar to those held in Vietnam. However, for Cambodians and Laotians, the patterns of occupations have completely changed. Peasants and traders in Cambodia have become unskilled laborers, service workers, or are unemployed. Two thirds of Laotians do not have any job in Quebec City. The Vietnamese have been relatively more successful in economic integration than Cambodians and Laotians.

Potocky and McDonald (1995) reported on a study of Southeast Asian refugees in the United States. The study aimed to (1) examine the economic integration of Indochinese refugees (from Vietnam, Laos, and Cambodia) who had been in the United States for up to 15 years, (2) assess the economic status of Indochinese refugees using three indicators - the use of public assistance, employment, and household income, and (3) investigate several variables in economic integration that have so far received only limited attention, such as citizenship. The authors also discussed the five most important predictors of economic status of Indochinese refugees: (1) education, (2) citizenship, (3) ethnicity, (4) English-speaking ability, and (5) length of residence. They found that, on average, Indochinese refugees had less than a high school education.

Ethnicity was one of the five most important factors for predicting poor economic status among Indochinese refugees. The researchers found that people of Chinese-Vietnamese and Vietnamese ethnicity enjoyed better economic conditions than those from Laotian, Hmong, and Cambodian groupings; probably because the first two groups came from more Westernized and urban backgrounds. In addition, they received great social support from the Chinese-American community in California. The study showed that better English-speaking ability was associated with better economic status. Duchon (1997) studied the adaptation of Hmong refugees in metropolitan Atlanta from 1991 to 1993. The study concentrated on household structure, economic and educational activity, organizational membership, health-seeking behavior, and migration history. The purpose of the research was to identify factors that contributed to the successful adaptation of Hmong refugees in Georgia and the South compared to other places in the U.S. The Hmong in metropolitan Atlanta and other places in the Southeast have participated well in the wage economy; their children are upgrading their education; individuals cooperate in community activities, Hmong owner-

ship of home and/or property has increased; and dependence on public assistance ranks low.

Social support for refugees comes from various sources. Religion is one of those important sources. Canda and Phaobtong (1992) conducted an ethnographic study of human services offered by three Buddhist mutual assistance associations in the midwestern United States. The researchers found that Buddhist informants did not label services as distinct categories after the order of Euro-American human services system, such as: health, mental health, social, or educational. The temple and Buddhist associations have developed services by blending the traditional activities, such as religious celebrations, with the ad hoc requirements of the refugee community. The temple collects food and other materials from donations given by the community. Donations expressing a Buddhist's generosity are called, **dana** (in Pali). The temple staff gives this donated material support to people who need temporary shelter, clothing, food, or other material assistance. Monks perform services that would be labeled by Western system as counseling and mental health services. Meditation and bereavement rituals help community members suffering from post-traumatic stress. The family and significant others in the community are involved in planning treatment and helping people return to a normal life. Monks and lay staff of the Buddhist associations also engage in crisis intervention. Monks providing spiritual support rely on religious principles through religious symbolism and authority. Further, lay volunteers help refugees with problems of a secular nature, such as legal problems. These volunteers are often bicultural caseworkers. The temple encourages preservation of culture by providing a place for training and performing traditional activities, such as, dance, music, and art.

7. Findings

7.1 Demographic description of research participants

The participants were five couples. All of them were cultural and ethnic Lao people, although several had Chinese or Vietnamese blood. All of the participants had two to five children. The ages ranged from two to twenty-five years. Two couples had children under ten. Most had left Laos with their spouse and children, except for one male informant and his spouse, who had met and married later in Calgary. The participants had lived in Calgary from twelve to nineteen years. When they fled Laos, all had to swim or use boats or rafts to cross the Mekong river, which, at that point, forms the border between Laos and Thailand.

Four informants had their own business before they left Laos: a drug store, a grocery store, a small restaurant, and a hair salon. Three participants were civil servants working in government departments in Laos. Two were small farmers and one was a carpenter. Most of them changed their employment and work, becoming laborers in Calgary. Only two informants were able to use their former educational background as professional technicians in Calgary. They all realized the discrepancy between the jobs they held in Laos and their current jobs in Calgary. However, most of them for various reasons were satisfied with working and living in Calgary. Most of the participants fared well economically. Upon arrival, women as well as men started working as common laborers in venues such as factories, restaurants, road construction, and cleaning. They were eager to work. They exhibited their motivation when they recounted how they had found their first job. Currently most of them have one job. However, only two informants have employment in accordance with their educational background as professional technicians. Another informant owns a small business. Most work in the service industry, a meat plant, a furniture factory, a machine shop, and a restaurant. Generally, they are satisfied with their employment, wages, and their friends in the workplace. Two women and one male participant

were not employed at the time of the interview. One of them had had an accident in the workplace. Another had been injured in an automobile accident. The last was a mother taking care of her three pre-teenage children.

The household incomes of the research participants ranged from \$20,000 to more than \$100,000 per annum. Two couples were both employed. One family had three persons contributing to the household income. Another family had only one breadwinner. One couple had no household income at the time of the interview but depended on public assistance and support from their children. Most informants had received some unemployment benefits at least once. Only three male informants had never received any unemployment benefits. All of the families received child allowances, except for one couple whose income made them ineligible. Most of the participants were satisfied with the public assistance. However, those who used to have unemployment benefits showed negative attitudes toward some government officials they had contacted. They complained that the officials treated them with disdain, and they felt humiliated. These informants said they preferred hard work to receiving unemployment benefits. After once being embarrassed, two female informants never applied for unemployment benefits again.

Having freedom was the chief reason why most of the participants felt satisfied with living in Calgary. None wished to return to Laos permanently, though one couple hesitated to discard out of hand any notion of a return to Laos for permanent residence. The rest responded immediately that they only wanted to visit Laos for a limited time. They appreciated the quality of life in Calgary. They liked the high standard of sanitation, the high technology, the better educational system, and the local peoples' acceptance of ethnic diversity.

7.2 High degree of ethnic identification

According to Sue et al. (1998, pp. 291-293), ethnic identity must

be understood in terms of the degree of personal identification one has towards his or her ethnic group. The major components of ethnic identity include affect, cognition, and behavior. The affective component refers to ethnic self-identification or labeling that people use for themselves, their sense of belonging, and their commitment to members of their own ethnic group. The cognitive component involves interest in and knowledge about their ethnic group, including its history, traditions, values, norms, and mores. The behavioral component encompasses the amount of involvement with which people participate in distinctly cultural practices and activities.

The results suggest that the participants had an extremely high degree of identification with Laotian culture. Their expressions covered all the three components of ethnic identity. As for the affective component, all the research participants were definitely proud to be Laotians. They identified themselves as Laotian among non-Laotian people. As for the cognitive component, they were obviously aware of their Lao cultural system. Although the participants consisted of two main religious groups, all were firmly attached to their ethnic identity. They expressed strong relationships among themselves and with the local Laotian group. After all their years in Canada, they still defined themselves as Lao.

"I've never changed my way of thinking. I always think like an ordinary Laotian does. I've lived here for around twenty years. So I may think like a Canadian does in some ways. But I've never quit the ways of Lao thinking." (M.5)

They showed a powerful sense of being Laotian. Some of them had only Lao names—and their children as well.

"I am proud to be Laotian. My friends at work offered me a Western name. I kindly replied to them that I preferred to use my Lao name. My wife and my children, they all have no Western name." (M.4)

The informants expressed a strong desire to retain their Laotian identity. They had a clear sense of belonging and commitment to their ethnic group. They enjoyed social life mostly with their Laotian friends. Their concerns and worries about losing Lao culture went beyond pride; their culture continued to affect the behavioral component of ethnic identity.

"Of course, I've lost some of my Lao cultural values, although I try so hard to keep them. Here in Canada, we cannot expect everything to be the same as in Laos." (M.2)

"I hope they [our children] will be able to preserve our Lao customs." (F.5)

They were able to preserve their identity well for at least three reasons.

First, the Laotian refugees left their country of origin with the intention to continue their cultural practices and ethnic identity. Their fundamental reasons for leaving their home country were (1) fear of the Communist regime, (2) hatred of the authoritarian environment, and (3) economic hardship. The findings confirmed such writings as Kymlicka (1995) that the refugees did not choose to give up their culture and their national rights in their home country. In fact, a prime motive for leaving was to preserve their culture. All they had chosen to leave was a location.

The Laotians had the same culture as the Thais living near the Thai-Lao border. Because of this, some of the research participants said that they left Laos with the intention to stay and live in the northeastern part of Thailand. Some did not know when they left that there would even be an opportunity to go to some third country.

"I swam across the Mekong to Nongkhai together with my friends. I just wanted to find a job in Thailand." (M.2)

"I did not know at first that we could go to the U.S. or France or Canada. When I stayed at our Thai friend's home [in Nongkhaj] waiting for a job, the Thai officers announced that those who had no Thai I.D. card must show themselves at the camp. So I went to the camp." (M.3)

Only then, at the Thai camp, did they learn of possible resettlement abroad. The original intention to stay and live in Thailand, just outside Laos, indicated their aspiration to preserve and practice Lao cultural values. If the Thai government had allowed them to stay and have a job in those Thai provinces, the informants possibly would have chosen to do so, and live in that region of Thailand, instead of going to a third country. They knew that living in Thailand would be more congenial for living. They could easily adapt to the culture, which is similar to Lao-tian culture in those Thai provinces. The threat of an assimilation that would erode their culture did not arise by swimming the Mekong because there was no radically different culture in that region. The narration of their motives and their earliest expectations in the initial migration only served to underline that giving up Lao culture had never been a consideration. Their insecurities were all of a non-cultural kind.

Second, the environment fostered by Canada's deliberate cultural diversity played a significant role in enabling them to maintain cultural and ethnic identity. The participants admitted that the Canadian people were nice to them. They had not endured any inconvenience when they met or interacted with Canadians at large. They had no problem in access to goods and services. They appreciated Canadian people for accepting their differences. They thought Canadian people understood and had positive attitudes toward them. Those who worked beside Canadian colleagues usually had good relationships with them. Canadian friends accepted and respected them, and they did likewise.

Third, another major reason why the participants were able to preserve their cultural identity so well was that they had such firm bond-

ing to the Lao community. They spent most of their discretionary time with Laotian friends. They usually spoke Lao at home, ate Lao food, sang and listened to Lao music, and spent most of their leisure times with Laotian friends. They frequented the same temple as the majority of other Laotians in Calgary, and those who were Christian had their own Laotian Mennonite Church. In addition, they usually lived in the same geographical area or worked in the same place. They received considerable social support, mainly from their Laotian friends.

3.2 Heterogeneity in homogeneity

The participants' homogeneous nature is characterized by the similarities displayed in cultural practices. They spoke the same Lao language, ate the same Lao food, and had the same sense of belonging. They all got together mostly with their Lao community rather than other communities. These common characteristics were distinctive because they existed against the backdrop of multiculturalism.

However, looking inside the homogeneity, a certain heterogeneous quality emerged among the participants. The findings showed that there were two quite different groups, the Buddhist and the Christian. The findings also showed a degree of distance between these two groups.

"At first they came to me. But after I told them I am a child of God, I am a Christian, I love God, they have never come to see me since." (F.3)

"Some Laotians don't want to group together with us. They go to the church, the Christian church. They get together only with their church people." (F.4)

However, there was no personal tension between the Buddhist and the Christian Laotian groups. Both groups, in fact, had some linkages. They occasionally invited each other to participate in their groups' activities.

"Some Laotians get married and some died. I join them at the wedding parties as well as the funerals. But when they start to gamble I immediately return home." (F.2)

Some Laotians received information support from both groups.

"Sometimes I got information from Buddhist friends, sometimes from Christian-Laotians. By and large I have many friends from both groups." (M.2)

The Buddhist informants reported that they did not mind getting together with the Christian Laotians. In fact, they realized that these Christians felt uncomfortable getting close to them because they, the Buddhist Laotians, always had drinking as a big part of their get-togethers. They commented that it was the Christians who chose to avoid them, not the reverse.

This comment was confirmed by the Christian Laotians, who also revealed negative attitudes toward the drinking and gambling of the non-Christians. In addition, the researcher met several Christian Laotians who were interviewees, and they revealed the same attitudes.

"Many Laotian families are addicted to drinking. They have no happy life. They forget their future, they neglect their spirit. They don't believe in God. Consequently, their families have troubles. Some even break up." (M.3)

This objection to the non-Christians' lifestyle was a significant obstacle to a close relationship between the two groups and seemed to conflict with their desire to unify all the Laotians.

However, this did not mean that the Christian Laotians hated those Laotians who drink and gamble. On the contrary, they were ready to get close to any one suffering from drinking and gambling problems and wanted to support them. The interviews with both Buddhists and Christians confirmed this analysis. The Christian Laotians helped their

non-Christian friends by taking them to find jobs, giving them rides to work, lending them money, and bringing them to church. The Christian Laotians were sincerely concerned about all their Laotian friends, yet they felt they had to show their rejection of behavior they judged inappropriate. When those Laotian friends really needed some one to help them, the Christian Laotians did not hesitate to lend a helping hand.

Looking at the behavior of the Buddhist Laotians strictly from a religious standpoint, one must realize that Buddhism does not allow its adherents to drink and gamble. There are serious prohibitions against that. However, Buddhism is generally not a highly structured religion, and some Buddhists adhere to Buddha's teaching very loosely. Most people keep their faith and beliefs to themselves rather than displaying them outwardly or in public practices and observances (Vuong, 1998, p. 208). Buddhism encompasses a wide range of adherents. This happens in other religions in the world as well. Certain Buddhists follow their teachings strictly, just as strict believers in other religions do. Therefore, it was not the different religions that separated the Laotian refugees into two different groups, so much as attitudes toward certain behaviors.

On the one hand, the Christian Laotians' discomfort with the lifestyle of the non-Christians created the most identifiable wall partitioning the Laotians into two main groups. Yet this wall was, in fact, not uniform; it had its doors and windows. A genuine linkage existed between the two groups. They did not hate each other individually. All realized how different the lifestyles were. All were aware of the boundaries, and yet were ready to render assistance in times of need.

Therefore the self-conscious reality of Laotian refugees in Calgary involved these two polarities of homogeneity and heterogeneity. The homogeneity emerged dominantly whenever it was seen against the background of the multicultural environment. Though two groups existed, neither party viewed the other as less than real Lao people. The

heterogeneity would emerge inside the homogeneous reality in issues confined to religion and conduct.

7.4 Relationships with the local community

Most of the research participants had a small number of Caucasoid Canadian friends, except in the case of two male participants. The first male informant said he had almost thirty Caucasian friends in his workplace and seven of them worked under his supervision. These seven colleagues talked and discussed work with him every weekday. He also had around 200 Caucasian friends in his religious affiliation. The second male informant had six Caucasian friends in his workplace. He met and talked with them every weekday. He also had four other Caucasian friends who used to work and live with him in the same residence. He said one of these Caucasian friends helped him find a job. However, these two male informants noted that they hardly ever saw Caucasian friends outside the workplace. Normally, after work, they got together with their Laotian friends.

The Laotian refugees who participated in this study chose to associate with their Laotian rather than native-Canadian friends. Although some had more opportunity to interact with Caucasian friends, they still chose to limit those relationships to the workplace. They had no conflict with this and expressed fair satisfaction with the interaction with Caucasian friends. However, the distance from Caucasian friends persisted in all cases.

None of the research participants contributed to the local community around their homes. They had relatively superficial relationships with their neighbors compared to their relationships with Laotian friends. They rarely participated in activities sponsored by the local community.

"No, I haven't participated in particular neighborhood activities. I just greet them, talk to them. Some day their cars won't start, so I just help them." (F.2)

"We have no problem with our neighbors. They live with their own styles and so do we." (F.5)

"I respect them [white Canadians] and they respect me. We've got no problem." (M.1)

The word "respect" which the informants used for describing their relationships with the local community might be interpreted to mean that both the informants and their Caucasian friends recognized the boundary between them. It implies that the informants did not want to cross this boundary, and neither did their Caucasian friends.

The word "friendship" or "relationships" used by the research participants implied a wide range of meanings. The informants may have been signalling the existence of a boundary that did not mean they hated or disliked their Caucasian friends. Their Caucasian friends in turn accepted these signals, showing their tolerance, but not closeness, by accepting their different style of life. Such interactions consequently formed a certain boundary and social distance between the informants and the local community.

7.5 Balance between identity and relationships

The interviews showed that the Laotian refugees in Calgary maintained their cultural identity very well, but kept a significant distance from the local community. The acculturation of Laotian refugees in Calgary had a tendency to fit the "separation" rather than the "integration" model. Although the Laotians had no conflict with the local community, they obviously had weak interaction with it. They made no contribution to and did not participate in their neighborhood community, except for the Laotian community. Only a few of the research participants had active relationships with Canadian friends at work—relationships limited to their employment. After work, they participated in and enjoyed social life only with their own ethnic group. They were relatively isolated from the host society.

The research participants expressed more concern about their struggles to retain their cultural identity and values, than an interest in becoming a more integral part of Canadian society. If “integration” means a balance between maintaining one’s cultural identity and developing positive relationships with the local community, then the results indicated that the Laotian refugees in Calgary were far from achieving such a balance.

The imbalance indicated their strong intention to preserve their cultural identity and implied three other things. First, the participants seemed to be free from any coercion from the host society. Second, the dominant culture was unable, or did not seek, to inhibit their cultural preservation. Except for the children, the host culture clearly had less influence on the participants than the original culture. Third, the dynamic of the dominant culture of the host society provided no direction or motivation to force them to relax their ethnic identity. The Calgary environment offered enough room for the Laotian refugees to preserve their culture. However, the Laotian refugees in this study had not reached full integration at the time of this study.

It was obvious that the Laotian refugees were not being forced by the dominant culture to “keep in their place.” According to the independent model (Sue et al., 1998), there was no segregation in the case of the Laotian refugees in Calgary. They voluntarily chose to lead separate ways of life independent from the dominant culture of Calgary.

7.6 Existing Ethnic Organizations

The research participants revealed six ethnic organizations in which they participated: (1) the Calgary-Lao Association: (2) the Lao Seniors’ Club: (3) and (4) Two Buddhist temples: the Thai and Cambodian temples, (5) the Laotian Mennonite Church, and (6) the Bahai Faith Group.

The Calgary-Lao Association (or CLA) was the largest of the

aforementioned organizations, having around 400 members. Most of the Laotians in Calgary are members of the CLA, which has been functioning for more than ten years. Six of the ten research informants were members of this ethnic organization. These six members had different expectations of the CLA. Four CLA members expressed dissatisfaction with the administration of CLA, while the other two informants showed a fair degree of satisfaction. The four dissatisfied individuals revealed that the current CLA president tended to neglect his responsibility to the Laotian community and had done nothing to improve the Laotians' quality of life. These four members expected more activities and programs to serve the Laotian community from the CLA.

"I feel so disappointed. The CLA leader has very weak commitment to our brothers and sisters. I wish he did more than that."

(M.4)

"The president seems to focus on his business first. He is not active enough for the leading role." (M.1)

Although these four members remarked that the organization played a very weak role in serving its members, they did not want to confront the administration team. The opinions of the four dissatisfied members were different from the other two informants, who said that the CLA was doing well. As peripheral members they did not expect much from the CLA and knew nothing about its leadership. One of them did not even recognize the name of the current president.

The rest of the participants were not members and did not participate in the CLA. They were all Christians who were active in the Laotian Mennonite Church. One admitted that she had never heard of the CLA.

The Lao Seniors' Club had been operating for four years. Four of the informants were members (and were also members of the CLA), but had become dissatisfied with the CLA. Instead of confronting or

toppling the administration of the CLA, they set up a new organization, the Lao Seniors' Club. They explained that in Lao culture, people avoid confrontation. Confrontation may look normal in Western culture, but in Lao culture it always carries overtones of hostility, implying that the one who initiates it wants to create an enemy. All agreed that, with so few Laotians in Calgary, they needed to stick together as a family. The Laotians in Calgary felt attached to each other even though they had different religious beliefs. So they chose a different and more constructive approach to accomplish what they wanted.

Six participants usually went to two Buddhist temples, the **Thai and the Cambodian Buddhist temples**. Four went to only the Thai Buddhist temple, while the other two went to both. Most of the Buddhist informants, however, preferred to go to the Thai temple. Two female participants went to the temples quite often, at least twice a week, and every day in the three-month period of the Rainy Season Retreat (**Khao Pansa**). They went to the temples to provide meals for the monks (**liang phra**).

At the Buddhist temples they had much opportunity to meet many other Laotians, Thais, and Cambodians. According to the informants, most Laotians went to the Thai temple more often than to the Cambodian temple. In fact, more Laotians than Thais went to the Thai temple because there were only around 70 Thai families in Calgary.

Four research participants were Christians. They joined other Christian Laotians at the **Laotian Mennonite Church**, a small church with around fifty Laotian members. The research informants actively participated in all the church's activities.

A male informant said that he changed his belief to Christianity while in Canada. At first he did not believe in God. He spent his life in a wasteful way. He drank a lot, smoked a lot, and never found happiness in life. In 1984, he decided to go to the church in order to get some strength.

He was then able to quit drinking and smoking. He had found a new life because God gave him the strength. He still went to see his friends with whom he used to drink. They always teased him, "*Here comes the child of God, here comes the child of God.*" He was still their friend, but he had not returned to drinking and smoking again. Every day he devoted himself to God. He said he was busy with the church's activities, but he was really happy. He had found a meaningful life. He was very satisfied with the church and wished that every Laotian would come to God, come to the church, and have a meaningful and happy life like him.

A female participant said that she converted from Buddhism to Christianity when she was in the Thai refugee camp. She admitted that she had been quite strongly attached to Buddhist beliefs when she was in Laos. Even when she was very young, she had gone to the Buddhist temple very often, going sometimes with her mother to listen to sermons until midnight. Her interest in Christianity began in the Thai camp at **Nongkhai**, which had a very big church. She decided to become a child of God in that church. In Calgary, she continued her Christianity at the Laotian Mennonite Church. She attended the church to study the Bible, listen to sermons, and assist in everything she could do for the church. All four of the Christian informants expressed their strong attachment to the Laotian Mennonite Church. They consequently maintained a certain distance from the other Laotians.

Two research participants were members of **the Bahai Faith**, in addition to participating in the two Buddhist temples. They became Bahais when they were in Laos. They commented that the Bahai Faith can join smoothly with other religious beliefs. The Bahai Faith group could be considered as only a partially Lao ethnic organization, since it had more non-Laotians in it than Laotians, all sharing Bahai beliefs. The other members of the group were mainly Caucasian. One research participant said he had many Caucasoid-Canadian friends from the group.

These six organizations reflected that the pattern of association among Laotian refugees in Calgary was to some extent determined by their religious beliefs. Although the Calgary Lao Association, which had the majority of Calgary Laotians members, was wide open for any Laotian from any religious group, the Christian Laotians preferred to confine themselves to their own church. A Christian female informant admitted she did not even know of the CLA.

The Lao Seniors' Club was relatively new, having members who held both Bahai and Buddhist beliefs. Though the Bahai Faith had no religious restrictions, the Christian Laotians paid little attention to it. Some of the club's members were also members of the CLA. Some of the research participants were members of both. The makeup of the Bahai group shows that some Laotian refugees had a voluntary connection with other ethnic groups in Calgary outside the workplace. They did not always avoid other groups that were not comprised totally of Laotians.

The fact that there were six different ethnic organizations represented among the ten research informants confirmed the heterogeneity of the Laotian refugee population of Calgary. Most of the informants were members of more than one ethnic organization. These overlapping memberships implied that there was little or no tension arising from participation in different organizations. The Christian informants showed relatively more social distance from the others than did the Buddhist and Bahai groups. Nevertheless, one of the Christian informants obviously had social support networks linked to the others. Therefore, the heterogeneity of Laotians in Calgary existed in the context of some common characteristics. To put it another way, both homogeneity and heterogeneity characterized the Laotian refugees in Calgary. Strong allegiance to Lao cultural values among the participants reflected homogeneity. This homogeneity was apparent especially when compared with other ethnic groups in Calgary. The heterogeneity was manifest when certain ethnic community affiliations were considered.

7.7 Participation as a means of cultural preservation and social support

All of the research participants were attached to an ethnic organization as a means to retain their ethnic identity. They attended the organization to meet other Laotians, to participate in social and cultural activities, to seek and provide any needed support. The informants' statements about their children's participation in the ethnic organizations affirmed that they regarded participation in ethnic organizations as a means to enculturate or socialize their children. However, the success of this attempt varied.

"When our children go to the temple, people speak Lao to them. But they don't understand. They feel embarrassed. Their physical appearance is Lao but they can't speak Lao. So they don't like to go to the temple. They likely can't keep Lao culture."(F.1)

"My two kids like the temple. They don't know much about Lao words. But they enjoy meeting Laotian people."(F.4)

All the research informants derived social support from their Laotian friends in the ethnic organizations. They would assist each other within their families first. Whenever they thought that they required extra help from outside the family, all of them sought assistance from their Laotian friends in the various ethnic organizations.

The Laotian refugees realized that the ethnic organizations they belonged to were places where people came to ask for help as well as to give it. Most of the Christian informants came to the Laotian Mennonite Church for mutual support. A Christian informant, however, said he also helped Laotians outside the church.

Several informants admitted that they were poor and depended greatly on their grown-up children. They went to the association because they wanted to meet their friends. They received emotional support and

entertainment from the ethnic organization.

The results showed that the pattern of social support among Laotian refugees in Calgary was related to their ethnicity and religion. It is likely that they helped one another within the family first. Then, if needed, they sought assistance from the Laotian friends in the same religious group. They also received and offered assistance to other Laotians with different religious beliefs. The different religious beliefs created some distance, but the Laotians were not totally separated from each other. Pride in Laotian identity still functioned to build a linkage among the sub-groups. The bond of ethnic pride perhaps had more influence in bringing them together, than religious differences had in keeping them apart.

8. Conclusion

The experiences of the research participants suggest that the Laotian refugees did not integrate well into Calgary. However, this does not mean that they were unhappy about living in Calgary. Although they maintained some distance from the dominant culture, they expressed satisfaction (ranging from fair to very satisfied) with living in Calgary. Their satisfaction can be understood by comparing their background in Laos with their current situation in Calgary. Their experience in leaving Laos was one of upheaval. They left everything when they crossed the Mekong River to refugee camps in Thailand. Their fears of being oppressed by the Communist Lao government was one of the main reasons for leaving Laos. They wanted most of all to live in a safe environment which would protect their freedom and rights.

Calgary, very manifestly, has a multicultural environment. Consistent with the literature, for example, Kymlicka (1995, p. 41) stated that the model of polyethnicity in Canadian public policy strongly supports the possibility of refugees maintaining their ethnic identity. The heterogeneity of immigrant cultures in Canada has replaced a national source of dominant values (Angus, 1988, p.xi, cited in McLellan, and

Richmond, 1994, p. 671). Calgary is no longer so British that “the thistle, shamrock and rose entwine the maple leaf forever.”

The findings show that the participants voluntarily conformed to dominant norms of the main society while preserving their cultural identity. However, they did not attain successful integration. It is clear that the Laotian refugees have not fully integrated into this mosaic society. Although they have never experienced any barriers designed to impede them, they still do not engage in reciprocal relationships with the local community.

However, integration is a dynamic that involves a very lengthy process. Several participants who worked with Caucasoid Canadians had closer relationships with the local community than did the rest. This implies that the Laotian refugees had never refused the relationships with other ethnic groups. If the Laotians could overcome the language barrier and have better opportunities to work with Caucasoid Canadian colleagues, they would have closer engagement with the dominant culture. Progress in full integration depends upon improving English skills and upgrading employment. If they gain higher levels of employment, this will enhance their integration by giving them more opportunities to interact with Caucasoid Canadians.

The findings suggested that the Laotian refugees wanted to improve their quality of life. The participants admitted that the Laotians in general lack proficiency in English. They admitted that language barriers are major obstacles to employment opportunities and career development. Improved English skills would enable them to increase interaction with and balance their integration into society. They essentially required programs that would improve their language skills.

Most Lao ethnic organizations in the research need financial support. They have a strong commitment to serving their disadvantaged members, such as senior citizens who cannot understand English. The

various Lao organizations should cooperate and group together in order to negotiate financial resources and support from local government and related organizations. They should stick together to improve the quality of life for all Laotians. Instead of persistently seeking to persuade those with different religious beliefs to become members of their sub-group, the priority of uniting all Laotians for the benefit of all Laotians should come first. The more they reduce the distance among themselves, the more bargaining power they will gain for the entire Laotian community.

The Laotian informants had their own reasons for avoiding confrontation as a means of conflict resolution. First, they retained their traditional approach to political problem solving within the Laotian community as an integral part of their cultural values. They spontaneously maintained the peaceful way of problem solving as a consistent expression of their ethnic culture. Second, there was such a small number of Laotians in Calgary that they viewed themselves even more as family, and were even more careful of the feelings of fellow Laotian brothers and sisters. Although they had different religious beliefs, they still wanted to hold together all the Laotians in Calgary. If every Laotian had this approach in mind, other approaches such as open debate or public scrutinizing would be considered inappropriate. If “becoming a refugee is, by definition, to lose everything” (Vuong, 1998, p. 213), then why would they choose to lose again, namely, to lose some Laotian friends? They had come to an extremely different environment from their homeland. They had appropriate reasons to choose their traditional and peaceful way rather than to practice an open and divisive debate, even though it is accepted in democratic society. Building up a new organization instead of dethroning the current leader of an existing organization was not a bad solution. It benefited their Laotian people without damaging the community spirit.

In reflecting on open democratic debate and the traditional ways of Southeast Asians, one should remember that democratic traditions

do not operate in a vacuum. They emerged from and are firmly connected to a cultural context very different from Southeast Asia.

Indeed, it is not necessary to discard the traditional Lao way of problem solving. If the democratic tradition is but one way members of a society use for solving conflicts over political interests, then there are other equally valid and indigenous ways for solving these issues among various ethnic groups. When conflict appears within an ethnic group, that group may use its own traditional way to solve the problem. Meanwhile, if some group uses only its traditional way to solve a community problem, it need not mean that they are ignoring the democratic approach. The democratic approach of open, frank discussion is very important for an ethnic group seeking to negotiate with other ethnic groups or the majority group of the society.

The researcher regarded the Calgary Laotians' use of a traditional way to solve their community issues suitable and appropriate. It did not hinder their desire to improve their living standard as well as their integration into the society. However, they do require democratic skills for interacting with the broader society. The democratic tradition will be necessary for them to survive and protect their rights in the broad multicultural context. The informants may or may not have had this Western insight. The peaceful way of Lao tradition emphasizes avoidance of conflict and confrontation. That they embraced their own way only reflected their self-esteem and loyalty to their own culture.

Avoiding confrontation and retaining peaceful approaches to conflict resolution are essential for preserving their own community. But out in the broader multicultural context, they require democratic traditions as recommended by Vuong (1998, p. 211). They should acquire and employ these common means in this democratic setting especially when competing with other ethnic groups and Canadian society at large. They can use the customary democratic traditions effectively, if exercised with a common united voice.

Although this research had no intention of comparing the Laotian refugees with the Thais living in the same city, the researcher would like to offer an opinion. The Laotians have positive relationships with the Thais. They assisted each other in various ways. The Thais have relatively more opportunities and more capacities to adjust to Canadian society. The Thai lifestyle is more flexible with regard to Western culture than the Laotian. Furthermore, the Thais had not experienced the horrors of war as had the Laotians.

Shifting from the Canadian scene to Bangkok, some might say that the Thais in Bangkok often look down upon the Laotians. The researcher does not totally agree with this statement. He rather regards this phenomenon as a changing one. He had many **E-San** student friends who were in the same classroom with him since high school. His friends avoided speaking Lao when with Bangkok students because of the feeling that they might be looked down upon. However, when these friends were in the university, they completely changed. They openly revealed their identity. They felt no obstacles at all to speak Lao loudly and happily. The researcher agrees that a number of Thais feel superior to the Laotians. But this continually changes.

Furthermore, when we discuss “condescending” behavior, we always sense it in a very negative way. Thai and Lao languages and culture are close to each other. Some words and some patterns of social behavior are different. But this “difference” is understood among both Thais and Laotians. They know that the difference is based on a feeling of friendship.

When people see differences with other cultures, they may laugh at them. This laughter, however, does not always convey disdain. The Laotian friends of the researcher laughed at the researcher when he spoke Lao words incorrectly, just as Thais do when they hear a Laotian speak Thai incorrectly. The researcher believes that the sense of

looking down upon the Laotians is not so serious. The feeling of brotherhood plays a more important role than the negative one.

Finally, the study of integration as a phenomenon requires a delicate approach. The theoretical concepts involved should be redefined and reconstructed according to the nature of the research participants. Implications and applications of the findings, however, are the burden of the research consumers rather than the researcher.

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