



MASSACHUSETTS CULTURAL COUNCIL
FOLK ARTS & HERITAGE PROGRAM

FIELDNOTES

Fieldworker(s) [(Initials) Name]: (MH) Maggie Holtzberg, (DB) David Blackburn

Accession Numbers:

MH-10-10-FN

Fieldnotes

- - -D

Audio recordings

MH-10-10-D

Photographic documentation

- - -M

Additional materials

Initial Contact: _____ Contact Date: 9/24/2010

Related Accession Numbers: - - - - -

Individual/Group/Event: Chum Bend at Community Khmer Buddhist Monks Center

Address: Triratanaram Temple 21-25 Quigley Avenue

City: North Chelmsford Zip: 01863 County: _____

Phone: Daytime: [REDACTED] Evening: _____

E-mail: _____ Website: [REDACTED]

Contact person: Maya Men

Title: _____

Location of Interview: Main meditation hall

Street Address: see above

City: _____ Zip: _____ County: _____

Special Needs (including translation): Chanting and prayer was in Khmai. Maya and Samnang translated

Traditions documented on visit (traditional art/skills, occupational experience, ethnic or religious community): Prayer and observance of Chum Bend; lunch provided by laity; stupa built by Yary Livan and Samnang Khoeun

Traditions noted for follow-up: Temple model and plans for building; more on Phum Bend - memorializing of the dead

Other Possible Contacts: _____

MH-10-10-FN Triranaram Temple, North Chelmsford, MA. 9/24/10

Summary: Maggie had arranged to meet with Yary Livan and Samnang Khoeun to visit the Triranaram Temple in North Chelmsford so we could see the stupa they had designed and built. The Temple was founded in 1985 by the center's abbot, Venerable Sao Khon Dhamathero. It is one of two temples serving the Cambodian community of Greater Lowell.

David Blackburn and Maggie met Samnang Khoeun at Yary's house and then followed him to the temple. We arrived at 11:00 and were met by Maya Men, who works for the Temple, but lives in Rhode Island. She explained that chanting and prayers were taking place in the main meditation hall and that we were welcome to come observe. First we walked around, looking at various temporary altars and Buddha sculptures on the property. Samnang pointed out that the slope and angles of the roof over one structure were more westernized and not typical of Cambodian vernacular architecture. At the edge of the parking lot we noticed six plastic bowls were filled with food and incense. Maya explained that today was a special celebration – Phum Ben -- the end of a two-week ritual celebration memorializing the dead. Samnang says, "It's a celebration of our ancestors." Maya adds, "It's like Halloween. In our culture, we believe that the dead – we don't know whether we go up or down. There are three levels to Hell. At this time of year, they let out all of the dead for 15 days. People who have committed a lot of sins, they cannot see the sun." Like vampires, asks Maggie? "Yes. During this time, they let them out from the underworld, before sunrise. You call for them." The food is an offering to the dead – a way of placating them so they won't cause you harm.

Samnang tells us he was a monk for three months. His name means lucky. His older brother's name, Samkang, means important.

Maya explains that the monks only eat before noon. A breakfast and a lunch. We head toward the Meditation Hall – we can hear the chanting, which is amplified. The monk uses a hand-held microphone. Samnang explains that he will bow three times – once for the Buddha, once for the dharma (the Buddha's teachings) and once for the monks. We don't have to – "If you don't believe."

Inside are monks and nuns and laity, sitting on the carpeted floor facing the abbot, Venerable Sao Khon Dhamathero. Many of the women wear white blouses, adorned with what appear to be hand crocheted or embroidered white scarves. The chanting and prayers are loud. It's difficult to hear Maya and Samnang explaining what is going on and what things mean. The sweet, pungent smell of incense fills the air. At the altar are several statues of Buddha besides the main marble one from Burma. Behind this large Buddha is a round disk emitting colored flashes of light. Below is an assortment of food and beverage offerings: cooked rice, mushrooms and coriander, bananas, a bottle of ginger ale, a Starbucks Frappuccino coffee drink. A metal bowl is filled with 49 rice balls – symbolic of the 49 days the Buddha fasted before becoming enlightened. Honey colored shiny paper spires reach toward the sky.

The stupa is set off to the side but in front of the main altar. Samnang points out the various levels leading up to the relic. There are 8 steps before nirvana – 9 steps in all. Like walking the steps to Heaven. The Buddha (two tiny bones – the size of a grain of rice -- from his body) are in the pagoda at the 9th level. Samnang has brought the foam core model he had made and explains the variations Yary had suggested to make it more traditional.

Samnang points out what makes a traditional Cambodian roof form – a serpent tail at top, with serpent

Maggie asks what are in the two glass jars at the corners of the top level – Maya says one holds string used in ceremonies and the other rocks and stones from the Buddha's birthplace.

The chanting and prayers end soon after noon. We are invited to join everyone for lunch. We accept, a bit embarrassed to be imposing. Everyone sits on the floor to eat, circling many bowls of various dishes – noodles, caramelized pork, vegetables, fried banana, banana leaf wrapped around bean past and sticky rice, and soups. When we leave, we are each offered a goody bag of sorts – filled with what appear to be donated food and supplies: a box of cereal, a huge bag of potato chips, flavored instant coffee, toothbrushes, toothpaste, Motrin, Dove soap, and a loaf of packaged bread.