

Celebrating The Freedom To Worship; Buddhists Flock to Catlett

The Washington Post

July 05, 1998, Sunday, Final Edition

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Section: LOUDOUN EXTRA; Pg. V03

Length: 787 words

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Body

While most Americans **celebrated** the country's independence with picnics, parades and pyrotechnics Saturday, thousands of Southeast Asian immigrants and refugees were converging on a **Buddhist** temple in Fauquier County to revel in their independence from religious persecution in their countries.

The Wat Lao Buddhavong, a **Buddhist** temple on 58 acres in **Catlett** in predominantly Baptist Fauquier, is one of the largest in the country. The temple festival, which continues today, began in 1991 to **celebrate** Southeast Asians' culture and their **freedom** in the United States at the same time Americans **celebrate** their **freedom**.

"Most Southeast Asians are immigrants or political refugees. Many of the countries they came from were communist countries -- Laos, Vietnam," said Elesia Nguyen, a temple volunteer who lives in Fairfax County. "Under communism, even though they say that you are allowed to have **freedom** of religion, you are constantly being watched by the government. They think religion is brainwashing people to overthrow the government."

Many of the immigrants, especially **Buddhist** monks, left their countries so they could freely practice religion. "Once a year, they're trying to **celebrate** their **freedoms**," she said.

Independence Day holds special meaning for Phim Phone, of Lakeland, Fla., who was planning to attend the weekend's festivities.

Phone, whose daughter interpreted for her, said she was 15 when she and her parents left Laos secretly by boat in 1980. Phone's father had been in the military, and after the communist regime took power in 1975, the family was in danger.

Phone spent three years in a refugee camp in Thailand working as a seamstress before her family entered the United States in 1983. Here, she said, she can express her opinions and practice her religion -- Buddhism -- without fear.

The Fauquier **celebration** has grown since it began in 1991, when as many as 3,000 people attended. Last year, nearly 10,000 participated. This year, organizers expected the number to double, said Achan Chandaphone Mingsisouphanh, the monk who came up with the idea of the festival.

As it has in the past, this weekend's **celebration** was expected to attract Thai, Cambodians, Burmese, Vietnamese, Chinese and other nationalities from the Washington area and across the country, Nguyen said.

Events and displays include Laotian and Thai folk dance and music, arts and crafts exhibitions, exotic foods, fireworks and a religious ceremony, which included meditation, prayer and offerings.

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The temple's abbot -- a position similar to a cardinal in Catholicism -- is Phra Achan Bounmy Kittihammavanno, who also is vice president of all Laotian **Buddhists** in the United States. According to Nguyen, Kittihammavanno is one of the most respected abbots in the world and one of the reasons the festival is so popular.

Kittihammavanno, 62, became a monk in Laos when he was 12. He left his country in 1980 and spent five years in a refugee camp in Thailand before gaining entrance to the United States.

Perched atop cushions in the middle of the temple, Kittihammavanno rarely speaks. Visitors, upon entering the temple, rush to kneel in front of him and touch their foreheads to the ground in respect.

When it was built in 1987, the temple caused some controversy in **Catlett**, a town of 328 residents in southeastern Fauquier near the Prince William County border. Fauquier's minority population is tiny, and residents expressed fears about a religion that was unknown to them.

But in the 11 years that have passed, residents say they have become accustomed to their peaceful **Buddhist** neighbors, who tend to keep to themselves. Ten monks live on the grounds, and worshipers visit for religious rites and festivals throughout the year.

The original temple was destroyed by fire in 1993, when the group already was building a larger temple. The July 4 **celebration** that year also marked the new temple's opening.

Nguyen said the group originally was attracted to the area by the open, peaceful setting.

"It was built in Fauquier County because it was the only area where you could get that much land that was big enough to have that many people come," said Linda Sayas, a temple volunteer who lives in Annandale.

The grounds boast a colorful red and gold temple, a large, fragrant garden, a man-made pond filled with multicolored fish, and several statues of **Buddhist** deities.

Visiting Thai monk Phramaha Kittichot traveled halfway around the world two weeks ago to come to the temple to study with Kittihammavanno and help prepare for the festival.

"People live different ways. This brings people close together," he said. "It keeps the traditions alive."

Graphic

Photo, COURTESY of WAT LAO BUDDHAVONG TEMPLE , A festival **celebrating** Southeast Asians' culture and their **freedoms** here continues today at the Wat Lao Buddhavong **Buddhist** temple in **Catlett**. Above, a performer in last year's festival.

Classification

Language: ENGLISH

Subject: RELIGION (94%); IMMIGRATION (90%); **BUDDHISTS** & BUDDHISM (90%); REFUGEES (90%); FESTIVALS (89%); US INDEPENDENCE DAY (78%); REFUGEE & RELIEF CAMPS (78%); MEDITATION (78%); CLERGY & RELIGIOUS VOCATIONS (78%); CHRISTIANS & CHRISTIANITY (78%); HOLIDAYS & OBSERVANCES (78%); RELIGIOUS DISCRIMINATION (78%); **FREEDOM** OF RELIGION (77%); CATHOLICS & CATHOLICISM (77%); PROTESTANTS & PROTESTANTISM (77%); ARTS FESTIVALS & EXHIBITIONS (76%); TYPES OF GOVERNMENT (75%); COUPS (68%); DANCE (60%); EDITORIALS & OPINIONS (50%)

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Industry: FESTIVALS (89%); ARTS FESTIVALS & EXHIBITIONS (76%)

Geographic: FLORIDA, USA (79%); UNITED STATES (95%); LAO PEOPLE'S DEMOCRATIC REPUBLIC (94%); SOUTH-EASTERN ASIA (93%); THAILAND (92%); MYANMAR (79%); VIET NAM (79%); CAMBODIA (79%)

Load-Date: July 5, 1998

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