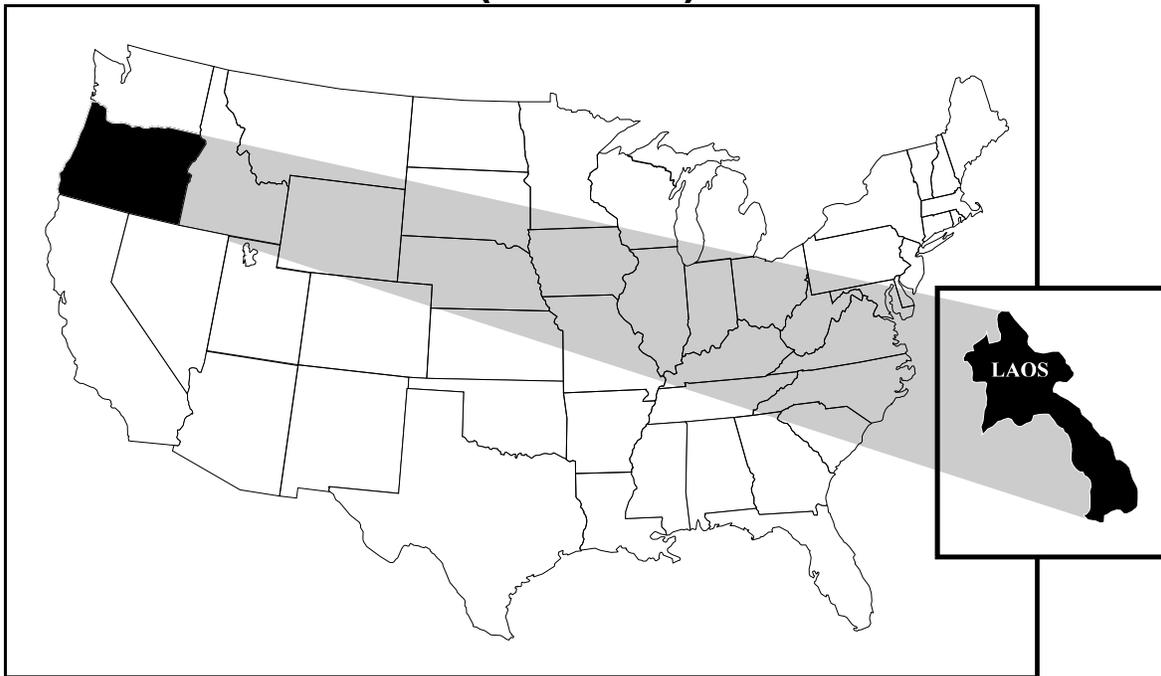


Laos (LAH-oh)



<u>Population</u>	4,837,237
% under 15 years	45%
<u>Commo</u>	
TV	no figure
Radio	1:11
Phone	no figure
Newspaper	no figure
<u>Health</u>	
Life Expectancy	Male 51/Female 54
Hospitals	1:402
Doctors	1:3,555
IMR	99:1,000
<u>Income</u>	\$900.00 per cap
<u>Literacy Rate</u>	84%

1. Religious Groups

a. Buddhist 60%

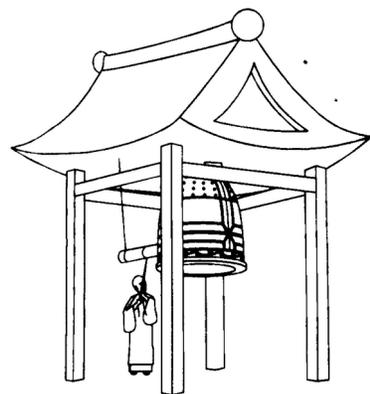
(1) Background *"Buddhism was the state religion of the Kingdom of Laos, and the organization of the Buddhist community of monks and novices, the clergy (sangha), paralleled the political hierarchy. The faith was introduced beginning in the eighth century by Mon Buddhist monks and was widespread by the fourteenth century. A number of Laotian kings were important patrons of Buddhism. Virtually all lowland Lao were Buddhists in the early 1990s, as well as some Lao Theung who have assimilated to lowland culture.*

Since 1975 the communist government has not opposed Buddhism but rather has attempted to manipulate it to support political goals, and with some success. Increased prosperity and a relaxation of political control stimulated a revival of popular Buddhist practices in the early 1990s."

(Unless stated otherwise, all quotations are from the Library of Congress Country Studies/Area Handbooks--Laos)

(2) Wat (waht) *"For the Lao Loum, the wat (Buddhist church/temple/monastery) is one of the two focal points of village life (the other is the school).*

The wat provides a symbol of village identity as well as a location for ceremonies and festivals. Prior to the establishment of secular schools, village boys received basic education from monks at the wat. Nearly every lowland village has a wat, and some have two.



Minimally, a wat must have a residence building for the monks and novices (vihan), and a main building housing the Buddha statues (sim), which is used for secular village meetings as well as for prayer sessions. Depending on the

wealth and contributions of the villagers, the buildings vary from simple wood and bamboo structures to large, ornate brick and concrete edifices decorated with colorful murals and tile roofs shaped to mimic the curve of the naga, the mythical snake or water dragon. An administrative committee made up of respected older men manages the financial and organizational affairs of the wat."

(3) Life cycle events "Buddhist ceremonies generally do not mark events in a life cycle, with the exception of death. Funerals may be quite elaborate if the family can afford it but are rather simple in rural settings. The body lies in a coffin at home for several days, during which monks pray, and a continual stream of visitors pay their respects to the family and share food and drink. After this period, the body is taken in the coffin to a cremation ground and burned, again attended by monks. The ashes are then interred in a small shrine on the wat grounds."

(4) Buddhism under communism "The Lao People's Democratic Republic (LPDR) government's successful efforts to consolidate its authority also continues to influence Buddhism.



In political seminars at all levels, the government taught that Marxism and Buddhism were basically compatible because both disciplines stated that all men are equal, and both aimed to end suffering. Political seminars further discouraged 'wasteful' expenditures on religious activities of all kinds, because some monks were sent to political reeducation centers and others were forbidden to preach.

The renunciation of private property by the monks was seen as approaching the ideal of a future communist society. However, Buddhist principles of detachment and nonmaterialism are clearly at odds with the Marxist doctrine of economic development, and popular expenditures on religious donations for merit making are also seen as depriving the state of resources. Thus, although overtly espousing tolerance of

Buddhism, the state undercut the authority and moral standing of the sangha by compelling monks to spread party propaganda and by keeping local monks from their traditional participation in most village decisions and activities.

During this period of political consolidation, many monks left the sangha or fled to Thailand. Other pro-Pathet Lao monks joined the newly formed Lao United Buddhists Association, which replaced the former religious hierarchy. The numbers of men and boys being ordained declined abruptly, and many wat fell empty.

Participation at weekly and monthly religious ceremonies also dropped off as villagers under the watchful eye of local political cadre were fearful of any behavior not specifically encouraged.

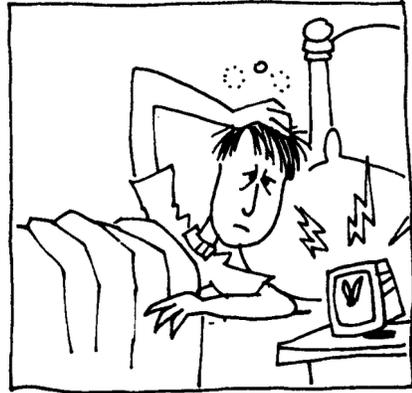
The [low point] of Buddhism in Laos occurred around 1979, after which a strategic liberalization of policy occurred. Since that time, the number of monks has gradually increased, although as of 1993, the main concentrations continue to be in Vientiane (vee-uhng-JAHN) and other Mekong (MAY-khong) Valley cities.

Party officials are allowed to participate at Buddhist ceremonies and even to be ordained as monks to earn religious merit following the death of close relatives. The level of religious understanding and orthodoxy of the sangha, however, is no higher than it had been before 1975, when it was justly criticized by many as backward and unobservant of the precepts."

b. Indigeneous belief (40%)

(1) Spirit world *"The belief in phi (pee, spirits) colors the relationships of many Lao with nature and community and provides one explanation for illness and disease.*

Belief in phi is blended with Buddhism, particularly at the village level, and some monks are respected as having particular abilities to exorcise malevolent spirits from a sick person or to keep them out of a house. Many wat have a small spirit hut built in one corner of the grounds that is associated with the phi khoun wat, the beneficent spirit of the monastery.



Many Lao believe that the khwan (kwahn) of persons who die by accident, violence, or in childbirth are not reincarnated, becoming instead phi phetu (malevolent spirits). [Indigenous] believers also fear wild spirits of the forests.

Other spirits associated with specific places such as the household, the river, or a grove of trees are neither inherently benevolent nor evil. However, occasional offerings ensure their favor and assistance in human affairs. In the past, it was common to perform similar rituals before the beginning of the farming season to ensure the favor of the spirit of the rice. These ceremonies, beginning in the late 1960s, were discouraged by the government as successive areas began to be liberated. This practice had apparently died out by the mid 1980s, at least in the extended area around Vientiane.

Ceremonies oriented to the phi commonly involve an offering of a chicken and rice liquor. Once the phi have taken the spiritual essence of the offering, people may consume the earthly remains. The head of a household or the individual who wants to gain the favor of the spirit usually performs the ritual.



In many villages, a person, usually an older man believed to have special knowledge of the phi, may be asked to choose an auspicious day for weddings or other important events, or for household rites. Each lowland village believes itself protected by the phi ban, which requires an annual offering to ensure the continued prosperity of the village. The village spirit specialist presides over this major ritual, which in the past often involved the sacrifice of a water buffalo and is still an occasion for closing the village to any outsiders for a day. To liang phi ban (feed the village spirit) also serves an important social function by reaffirming the village boundaries and the shared interests of all villagers."

(2) Shamans "According to Hmong belief, spirits reside in the sky, and the shaman can climb a ladder to the heavens on his magical horse and contact the spirits there. Sometimes illness is caused by one's soul climbing the steps to the sky, and the shaman must climb after it, locate it, and bring it back to the body in order to effect a cure. During the ritual, the shaman sits in front of the altar astride a wooden bench, which becomes his or her horse. A black cloth headpiece covers vision of the present world, and as the shaman chants and enters a trance, he or she begins to shake and may stand on the bench or move, mimicking the process of climbing to heaven. The chant evokes the shaman's search and the negotiations with the heavenly spirits for a cure or for information about the family's fortune.



Hmong shamans are believed to be chosen by the spirits, usually after a serious or prolonged illness. The illness

would be diagnosed by another shaman as an initiatory illness and confrontation with death, which was caused by the spirits. Both men and women can be summoned in this way by the spirits to be shamans. After recovery from the illness, the newly-called shaman begins a period of study with a master shaman, which may last two or three years, during which time he or she learns the chants, techniques, and procedures of shamanic rites, as well as the names and natures of all the spirits that can bring fortune or suffering to people. Because the tradition is passed orally, there is no uniform technique or ritual; rather, it varies within a general framework according to the practice of each master and apprentice."

2. Ethnic/Racial Groups

a. Lao Loum (LAHOU loom, lowland--68%) "The Lao Loum comprise several ethnic groups that began to move from the north into the Southeast Asian peninsula about 1,000 years ago. All Lao Loum speak languages of the Tai-Kadai family--for example Lao, Lue, Tai Dam (Black Tai), and Tai Deng (Red Tai). Lao Loum prefer to live in lowland valley areas and base agricultural production on paddy rice."

b. Lao Theung (LAHOU tuhng, midland--22%) "The Lao Theung are of Austroasiatic origin and are probably the [indigenous] inhabitants of Laos, having migrated northward in prehistoric times. Originally paddy rice farmers, they were displaced into the uplands by the migrations of the Lao Loum."

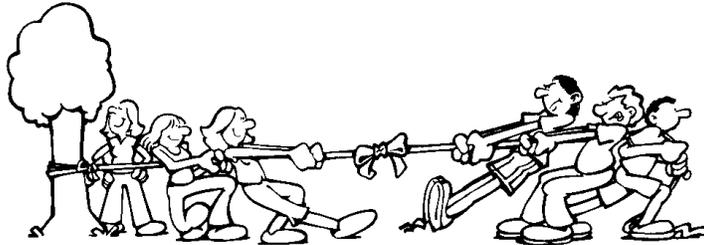


c. Lao Soung (LAHOU soong, highland) including the Hmong and Yao (9%) "These groups are Miao-Yao or Tibeto-Burmese speaking peoples who have continued to migrate into Laos from the north within the last two centuries. In Laos most highland groups live on the tops or upper slopes of the northern mountains, where they grow rice and corn in swidden fields."

Some of these villages have been resettled in lowland sites since the 1970s. The Hmong are the most numerous Lao Sung group, with villages spread across the uplands of all the northern provinces. Mien (Yao), Akha, Lahu, and other related groups are considerably smaller in numbers and tend to be located in rather limited areas of the north.

Government policy emphasizes the multiethnic nature of the nation and in many ways works to reduce the discrimination against midland and upland minorities by some lowland Lao. Use of the three general ethnic group classifications emphasizes the commonality of Lao nationality but obscures significant differences among the smaller groups. Most Laotians categorize ethnic groups in terms of these three broad categories, and villagers themselves, when asked their ethnicity by outsiders, are likely to respond Lao Loum, Lao Theung, or Lao Sung, rather than their specific ethnicity."

3. Gender Issues



a. Domestic violence *"There are reports that domestic violence against women occurs, although it is not widespread. Sexual harassment and rape are reportedly rare. In cases of rape that are tried in court, defendants are generally convicted."* (Unless stated otherwise, all quotations are from Human Rights Practices for 1996--Laos, U.S. Department of State)

b. Prostitution *"The Government relies on the Women's Union, a party-sanctioned organization, and youth organizations to educate girls and young women about the schemes of recruiters for brothels and sweatshops in Thailand and elsewhere.*



In the past, the Government has prosecuted some persons for involvement in such recruiting activities. During the year, law enforcement agencies conducted several raids of entertainment establishments accused of fostering prostitution."

c. Equality *"The Constitution provides for equal rights for women, and the Lao Women's Union operates nationally to promote the position of women in Lao society. However, traditional culturally based discrimination persists, especially among lowland Lao and some hill tribes. Many women occupy responsible positions in the civil service and private business, and in urban areas their incomes are often higher than those of men."*

4. Conflicts Border disputes with Thailand

5. Holidays and Festivals (The following material, adapted from Holidays, Festivals and Celebrations of the World Dictionary, compiled by Sue Thompson and Barbara Carlson, [Detroit: Omnigraphics, 1994], is instructive.)



a. Boun Phan Vet (boon-PAHN-vet, 12th month of the lunar calendar)

- In capital of Vientiane, national rites are held in That Luang, the temple where the Buddha's relics have traditionally been housed.
- Outside the capital, celebrated to honor Prince Vessantara, an earlier incarnation of the Buddha.
- Dramatic performances, love song contests, cockfights, banquets, and other social gatherings at which the villagers entertain neighbors.

- Also the time for young men to be ordained into the *sangha* or Buddhist monkhood.

b. Boun Bang Fai (*boon-bahng-FI*, full moon day of Vaisakha)

- Rain ceremony during Buddhist Vesak (*VAY-sahk*) or Vaisakha Puja
- Bun Bang Fai, or rocket festival, predates Buddhism and is intended to insure good crops.
- One of the country's wildest celebrations, with music and irreverent dances, processions and merrymaking.

c. Boun Makha Bouxa (*boon-mah-kah boo-SAH*, February)

- Important Buddhist holy day celebrated in India, and in Laos.
- Commemorates the occasion when 1,250 followers ordained by the Buddha arrived by coincidence at Veluvan Monastery in Rajagriha, India.
- Sermons in the temples throughout the day, and monks spend the day chanting
- People perform acts of merit-making, such as offering food to monks and freeing captive birds and fish.
- Monks lead followers in walking three times around the chapels of monasteries. Each person carries flowers, glowing incense, and a lighted candle in homage to Buddha.

d. Boun Khao Vatsa (*BOON-kow VAHT-sah*, September-October)

- Marks end of Buddhist Lent and beginning of *Kathin* pilgrimage season
- Also called Thadingyut (*tah-DING-ye-uhp*) or the Festival of the Waters, a popular time for pirogue or canoe races



e. Vatsa (VAHT-sah, June/July-September/October)

- Buddhist Rain Retreat, a three-month period when monks remain in monasteries to study and meditate
- Once completed, a month of celebration (known as *Kathin*) sees lay people presenting monks with new robes and other items

f. Other Laotian holidays

(1) Ho Khao Padap Dinh, Feast of the Dead (hawh-kow DAHP-DEEN, Aug/Sep; 9th lunar month)

(2) Labor Day (1 May)

(3) National Day (2 December)

(4) New Year's Day (1 January)

(5) Pi Mai, the Lao New Year (bee-MY, usually in May; by Lunar Calendar)

6. Customs

a. Gestures

- **Touch** Avoid touching another's head or pointing with the foot. Women cannot touch Buddhist monks.
- **Outward Affection** Avoid public displays of affection.
 - **Shoes** Removing shoes when entering a temple or home.

b. Freedom of religion *"The Constitution contains provisions for religious freedom. In practice, the Government continues to restrict freedom of religion, especially for some Christian denominations.*



Links with co-religionists and religious associations in other countries require government approval. Although the Government permits foreign nongovernmental organizations with religious affiliations to work in the country, it prohibits foreigners from proselytizing. The Government also restricts the import of foreign religious publications and artifacts.

The enforcement of these regulations varies by province. For example, the Catholic Church is unable to operate in the highlands and much of the north, but Catholics can openly attend churches and chapels in central and southern Laos. Several Protestant denominations operate more than 100 churches throughout the country.

There continued to be credible reports that local authorities detained some clergy for allegedly criticizing other religions and harassed, arrested, and jailed other religiously active clergy. The persistence of such reports underscores the continuing suspicion on the part of authorities toward some parts of the Lao Christian community. There were also unconfirmed reports that Lao Christians were sometimes barred from the Party or from government employment and that some rural Lao were not allowed to convert to the Baha'i faith.

By comparison, the Government openly encourages Buddhism and supports Buddhist organizations. High-ranking government officials routinely attend religious functions, and Buddhist clergy are prominently featured at important state and party functions. The Government permits Buddhist festivals without hindrance.

Two mosques and a Baha'i center operate openly in Vientiane."



c. People with disabilities *"With donor assistance, the Government is implementing limited programs for the disabled, especially amputees. The law does not mandate accessibility to buildings or government services for disabled persons."*

d. National/racial/ethnic minorities *"The Constitution provides for equal rights for all minorities, and there is no legal discrimination against them. However, societal discrimination persists."*

While the Government encourages the preservation of minority cultures and traditions, minority tribes have little voice in government decisions affecting their lands and the allocation of natural resources. Hill tribe interaction with the Government is limited by poor transportation and communication links and a shortage of government resources.

The Hmong (mohng) are one of the largest and most prominent highland minority groups. They split along clan lines during the U.S. war with Vietnam; many were strongly anti-Communist while others sided with the Lao and Vietnamese Communists. The Government repressed many who had fought against it, especially those still perceived to be resisting its authority.

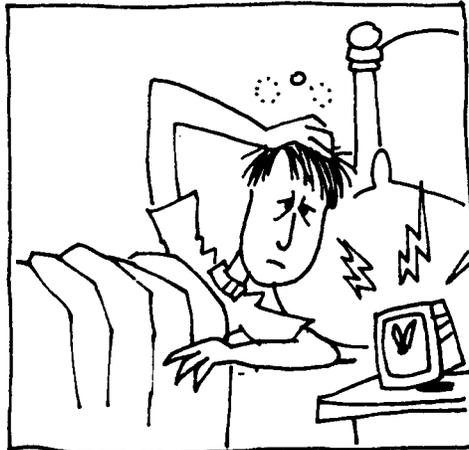
In recent years, the Government has initiated projects designed to integrate the Hmong into the general society, and an increasing number of those who fled the country after 1975 have repatriated to Laos without suffering persecution. Two U.N. observers who monitored repatriation efforts reported no incidents of abuse or discrimination during the year."



7. Resources for Further Study

Cummings, Joe. Lonely Planet Travel Survival Kit--Laos.
Berkeley, Calif.: Lonely Planet, 1994.

The best series, by far, of readily accessible travel guides. Don't leave for Laos without this text.



"Get involved."

Vocabulary List--Myanmar, Cambodia, Laos

Anade Rather than suffer a direct affront or embarrassment, Burmese prefer to withdraw or avoid a situation entirely. Rather than cause such a feeling in another, a Burman may completely avoid an encounter. Among good friends or family, expected behavior is that a person will never bring up matters that would bring shame or reduction of status to another.

Angkor Wat (AHN-kohr waht) Cambodian temple structure. Built by Suryavarman II and completed in 1150, the sandstone work is surrounded by a moat 2.5 miles long and 650 feet wide.

Aung San Suu Kyi Key opposition leader to Burmese military rule. Awarded Nobel Peace Prize in 1991. Held under house arrest from 20 Jul 1989 to 10 July 1995.

Bhikkhu A fully ordained Cambodian monk

Bonzes Cambodian novice monks

Kachin Ethnic group located in Northeast Burma, living under a system called Gummtsa. A chief owns all the land, his people pay tribute. The Kachin have never been subjugated by any of the local empires. They remain a part of Burma in their independent fashion of constant rebellion and antigovernment politics.

Karen Collective of ethnic groups living in southern and eastern parts of Burma. Always pro-British with over 30% converting to Christianity causing a strong distrust between Burmese and Karen. Resisted annexation to Burma and today still protest.

Khmer Rouge Communist party in Cambodia. Strongly opposed the 1970 coup which ousted Prince Sihanouk; but rather than supporting the Prince they revolted for control themselves. Captured the capital city, Phnom Penh, in 1975 (Kampuchea). Pol Pot began a genocidal policy eliminating all factions of intellectual, religious, and minority groups. Before Pol Pot was removed in 1979 by the Vietnamese, approximately 3 million people had been killed. Khmer Rouge remain to fight against the Vietnamese and continue guerrilla warfare tactics today.

Merit Burmans believe that the best way to ensure a better future life is to give as generously as possible to Buddhism rather than to secular charities or causes. Buddhist giving is noted in golden books kept by heavenly beings.

Pagan Ancient Burmese city founded in the mid-ninth century. King Anawrahta expanded the city into an empire by conquering the Mons in southern Burma. Anawrahta introduced Theravada Buddhism while allowing Mon art and architecture to remain. The Pagan era was peaceful and economically powerful.

Sihanouk, Prince Norodom (SEE-ah-nook, nohr-OH-dahm, 1922-) Appointed king of Cambodia in 1941. In 1955, Sihanouk was finally able to oust the French forming the Sangkum Reastr Niyum (People's Socialist Community). Sihanouk attempted to keep peace in Cambodia. In exile, Sihanouk led the government once again and in 1991 negotiated a treaty to end civil war. After elections in 1993, crowned king of the constitutional monarchy in the U.N. protectorate of Cambodia. Currently resides in exile in Beijing.

Thant, U (1909-1974) Third secretary-general of the United Nations from 1962-1972.

Waso Festival of Lights. Homes are lit with paper lanterns, all-night weaving contests take place. Young unmarried women weave robes, and at dawn offer them to images of the Buddha at the pagoda. Festival, under different names, is held in many parts of Southeast Asia.

Wat (waht) Buddhist church/temple/monastery, one of the two focal points of village life (the other is the school). The wat provides a symbol of village identity as well as a location for ceremonies and festivals. Prior to the establishment of secular schools, village boys received basic education from monks at the wat. Nearly every lowland village has a wat, and some have two.

Review Quiz: Myanmar, Cambodia, Laos



Part 1--Multiple Choice Place the letter of the most correct answer in the blank provided.

1. _____ In most Theravada Buddhist societies, highest respect is paid to
 - a. older women.
 - b. Buddhist monks.
 - c. local police.

2. _____ The Temple of Angkor is located in
 - a. Laos.
 - b. Cambodia.
 - c. Burma.

3. _____ The Burman practice of "anade" sees people in embarrassing or confrontive situations as doing what?
 - a. Pulling out a sword to show authority
 - b. Turning red faced, then smiling
 - c. Withdrawal or avoidance of the situation entirely

4. _____ Another name for a Buddhist temple in Laos is
 - a. church.
 - b. wat.
 - c. stupa.

5. _____ The Khmer Rouge terrorist group is located in which country?
 - a. Cambodia

- b. Myanmar
c. Malaysia
6. _____ In traditional Buddhist practice, Buddha is honored because he was
- a. a god.
b. an intermediary to God.
c. a deeply respected, very wise human being.
7. _____ The designated king of Cambodia, currently living in exile in Beijing, is
- a. Norodom Sihanouk.
b. Pol Pot.
c. U. Thant.
8. _____ Buddhist thought and practice in Burma/Cambodia/Laos is of what school?
- a. Zen
b. Theravada
c. Northern
9. _____ A major leader of the Khmer Rouge, now elderly and under house arrest, is
- a. Norodom Sihanouk.
b. Pol Pot.
c. U. Thant.
10. _____ The 1991 Burman winner of the Noble Prize, held under house arrest for over five years, is
- a. U. Thant.
b. Aung San Suu Kyi.
c. Kadir Kyanzitha.

Part 2--True/False Place a T or an F in the blank provided.



Unit 12h: County Area Studies--Myanmar (Burma), Cambodia, Laos

1. _____ During the Waso Buddhist Rains Retreat, monks wander _____ about the countryside asking for alms.
2. _____ Belief in both a vibrant spirit world and traditional Buddhist practice is found in many Laotian peoples.
3. _____ Meditation is one way of seeking nirvana in Buddhist _____ practice.
4. _____ Amputees in Cambodia receive government assistance and legal equality.
5. _____ Women within Burman and Cambodian society have traditionally enjoyed a high status.
6. _____ The current Laotian government openly encourages Buddhism and Buddhist organizations.
7. _____ Many Burmans feel the best way to ensure a better future life is through giving to Buddhist causes (merit).
8. _____ Most Burmans have little to do with psychic or supranormal powers.
9. _____ The term "Bonze" describes a fully ordained Cambodian monk.
10. _____ The current Laotian government is Communist.



"I truly believe that the ultimate determinant in the struggle that we will face will not be tanks and airplanes, but a test of wills and national character...a trial of spiritual resolve..the values we hold...the beliefs we cherish...the ideals to which we are dedicated."

General Charles C. Krulak

