

The Southeast Asia Program

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The Southeast Asia Program of the 1980 Festival of American Folklife will present the traditional culture of immigrants from three mainland Southeast Asian countries: the Khmer from Cambodia, the Lao and Hmong from Laos, and the Vietnamese.

India and China were two sources of immigration and culture for Southeast Asia, although the term "Indochina" places disproportionate stress on their influence. Archeological findings reveal signs of sophisticated civilization in Southeast Asia paralleling or possibly predating the development of civilization in the Middle East and China. Later, great civilizations such as Funan and Khmer in present-day Cambodia (the latter built Angkor), Lan Xang in Laos, and Champa in southern Vietnam, arose and died. Indian culture was felt most in Laos and Cambodia, and Chinese culture in Vietnam, which was ruled by China for 1000 years until AD 939. Hinduism left a deep impression on the literature, song, and dance of Cambodia and Laos, which reflect, for example, the stories of the Hindu epic, The Ramayana. But in all three countries, the contributions of India and China were combined with the indigenous cultures to form a unique whole. Southeast Asian women, for example, have traditionally had more freedom and equality with men than women in India and China.

Europeans first came to Southeast Asia with the arrival of the Portuguese in the early 16th century. In the 19th century, France consolidated its hold over Laos, Cambodia, and Vietnam (hence the term "French Indochina") and except for the Japanese invasion during World War II, controlled the area until 1954. Under the French, north, central, and southern Vietnam were called Tonkin, Annam, and Cochinchina, respectively. The European rule exploited the resources of Southeast Asia but brought political ideas that resulted in the independence movement and cultural contributions, including Christianity.

Southeast Asia possesses a great mix of ethnic groups and a great variety of languages and religions, among them Theravada and Mahayana Buddhism, Christianity, Islam, Hinduism, Cao Daim, Confucianism, Taoism, animism, and family worship. Lowland areas in all three countries are characterized by wet-rice agriculture and heavy concentrations of people, and highland or mountainous areas are characterized by dry rice and swidden agriculture and small, highly diverse concentrations of people. Of the groups participating in the Festival, the Hmong are highland people and the others mainly lowland. Although there are urban centers in these countries, the greater percentage of people are from villages.

In recent years, wars and economic and political upheaval have made refugees of many peoples from these countries. Some have become part of the most recent wave of immigration to the United States, bringing with them rich traditional folk and classical cultures.

