

SPECIAL REPORT: The Leftover People

Profile: The Monk American fled from a life adrift

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The first person you meet amid the Buddhist altars and mango trees is Gordon Baltimore, a barefoot monk in brown robes, smoking a cigarette and talking jive.

"I know every effing man, woman that's come here or was born here in the last 10 years," he says amiably, then refers to a visitor, a Hmong American woman, as "babe."

Baltimore, 49, says he's a former soldier of fortune from Harlem who - like the Hmong in the squatters village outside the temple - took refuge here because he felt adrift in an uncertain world and didn't know where else to turn.

For decades, he's helped run the temple's world-famous drug-treatment program, which has treated 100,000 patients, everyone from Hmong war veterans hooked on opium to crack-addicted British rock stars and Italian fashion designers.

He said he's come 180 degrees since his days as a young enforcer for New York drug dealers where "if you didn't pay your money, I'd come and break your arm."

Baltimore has often told the story of his career as a globe-trotting gun for hire - a career that began in a hamburger joint in Harlem when a scout for the legendary French mercenary Col. Bob Denard walked in and recruited him. "I was 17, and he promised me wine, women and song."

Destiny brought him to the temple 23 years ago. "I was on a bus from Bangkok to my new assignment when all four bus tires went flat at the same time right outside the monastery," he said. "I walked inside to get something to eat and the abbot said, 'I've been waiting for you.' It seemed like the war and all that stuff disappeared."

Baltimore became a monk, renounced wine, women and guns, and learned Hmong, Lao and Thai. He still helps treat 80 patients at a time, the majority from outside Thailand. His patients drink a bitter herbal brew to cleanse their system, then inhale the healing fumes of steaming lemon grass.

His longevity at the temple has made him its unofficial historian.

The Hmong odyssey to Wat Tham Krabok - which means "temple cave pipe" in Thai - began more than 40 years ago, according to Baltimore. A Buddhist high priestess, Luang Paw Yai, and her nephew were meditating in one of the limestone caves here when an old opium addict came to them for help.

They treated him with lotus buds. So successful was the cure that addicts from all over Thailand trekked to the cave.

"There was nothing but trees and stones, and they built it into a wat," or Buddhist monastic center, Baltimore said. "The high priestess brought in 100 Hmong to Tham Krabok and predicted that one day this would be their home."

When the priestess died in 1970, her nephew, a charismatic ex-cop named Phra Chamroon

Panchand, became abbot. In 1975, Chamroon won the Magsaysay Award, Asia's version of the Nobel Prize, for supervising the treatment of more than 50,000 addicts.

Opium addiction is a perennial problem among the Hmong, who have historically grown opium as a cash crop in the mountains of Laos, Vietnam and Thailand.

During their guerrilla war against the communists, which began in 1961 and drags on to this day, Hmong wounded in battle or stricken with diarrhea, malaria or jungle fever often used opium as a medicine.

Many who became addicts wound up at the temple, along with their families, who wouldn't leave for America without them. Baltimore estimates that over the years about 3,000 Hmong, most of them elderly, have gone through treatment at the temple.

When Ban Vinai and other Thai refugee camps closed in the 1990s, Chamroon opened the temple to several thousand Hmong war veterans and their families who weren't ready to go to America.

Many who came were "Sky Princes" - a mystical army of long-haired guerrillas led by an Angola-trained leader, Pao Kao Her. They traveled back and forth from the jungles of Laos to the temple camp, helping thousands of Hmong escape from Laos.

When Chamroon died in 1999, more than 40,000 Hmong were living at the temple village, said Baltimore, who assumed Chamroon's role as protector of the Hmong.

"The Hmong are going through the same thing the blacks went through in America, trying to get civil rights," he said. "The Hmong soldiers fought with us (Americans) in the war, their blood is in the same soil our blood is in, we put our ideas of freedom in them - I think every Hmong who wants to go to America should go."

He has the cell phone number of the Thai camp commander and top U.S. State Department officials, and said he's working hard to get as many Hmong out of Thailand as soon as possible.

"When they all move out, I'm going to be on the last plane," he said.

Like the Hmong on their way to America, Baltimore isn't sure what his future holds.

"This is just a bus stop - another bus is coming," he said. "I might be in the Bahamas, I might be in Iraq. You've got to move with the tide. When things go too smooth, it's not interesting. There's got to be ups and downs."

GRAPHIC: Sacramento Bee photographs / Manny Crisostomo Gordon Baltimore says he was a globe-trotting gun for hire from Harlem when the bus he was riding broke down outside the temple. For decades, he's helped run the temple's drug treatment program. His feet bear the cracks of years spent barefoot.

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