

The background of the cover is a light yellow-green color. It is decorated with several stylized, dark green leaf motifs. These motifs are arranged in a diagonal pattern from the top-left towards the bottom-right. Each motif consists of a small stem with two leaves. The leaves are simple, rounded shapes with a central vein.

BRAVING A NEW WORLD

Cambodian (Khmer) Refugees in an American City

MaryCarol Hopkins

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IN MEMORIAM

Armand Hopkins (1901-1989)

***This work is dedicated to my father, citizen of the world,
who instilled in me his fascination
with the Earth's people and their cultures.***

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Preface

Braving a New World is a holistic ethnographic account of a small community of Cambodian (Khmer) refugees in a medium-size city in the Midwestern United States. It is particularly a study of cultural continuity and change. For anthropologists, it is axiomatic that culture is learned throughout the lifespan and in a great variety of informal settings. To this end, I have examined the changing patterns of technology, kinship, age, gender and class relations, community organization, religion, and aesthetics in the lives of these Cambodians within the various contexts of their families, their community, their rituals, and their institutions.

The research upon which this work is based was conducted during the years 1987 through 1995 using classic ethnographic methods, primarily participant observation and extended informal interviewing. Although all anthropologists intend to produce a "true" account of the cultures they study, inevitably our research comes to reflect the interests and experiences of those informants more interested in or more able to participate in our work, as well as our own skills in interacting with a broad range of personalities. Although my work necessarily is colored by my greater access to women, the young, and those who had more time to spend, I have attempted here to convey the broadest possible understanding of the vibrant, multifaceted, polyvocal, and rapidly evolving nature of this community of individuals whose adjustments to life in the United States vary widely according to origins, recent experience, age, gender, class, health, family, individual personality, and present situation. At best an ethnography can only be a still photo of an opera.

I've been most fortunate to have had the friendship and assistance of many Cambodians. In order to respect the wish of some to remain anonymous, I have identified neither the city nor individuals by name and thus cannot here give specific credit to those who so generously took me into their homes and lives, but my gratitude is heartfelt. Several Cambodians have read parts of this, but no one all of it, despite so much help, there may be inaccuracies or misunderstandings, and I of course claim all responsibility for such errors. I hope you will all find something of yourselves and something of truth in this book. I know it is not the book any of you

would have written, but I hope you find it an acceptable account by an outsider looking in. Some Americans in the study, too, have been invaluable in sharing information and time with me. Most notable is “Ann,” but many others in the schools, the church, and the Agency have helped me throughout the years. To each of you, my everlasting thanks!

Many others have been indispensable to the research and writing of this work. For initial inspiration and continuing support in the course of my life as an anthropologist, I am indebted particularly to Beth Dillingham, James Vaughan, Margaret LeCompte, Mary Anne Pitman, and James Hopgood. Many anthropologists and colleagues have done research foundational to the present work; most notable, of course, is May M. Ebihara, whose study of Village Svay remains the only holistic ethnography of village Cambodia. I am especially grateful to my colleagues in refugee studies whose research has informed the present study and who were always willing to share their insights; foremost among these are Pam DeVoe, Nancy Donnelly, Bea Hackett, Ruth Krulfeld, Judith Kulig, Judy Ledgerwood, Jeffery MacDonald, Susan Needham, Lance Rasbridge, Ann Rynearson, and Amy Zaharlick. I also thank Northern Kentucky University, the University of Cincinnati, and the University of California at Long Beach for financial and other support. Special thanks, too, to Robert Kemper, the series editor, who waded through the first draft with judicious scissors and gentle advice; Michael Burch and Justin Bowen who provided the lovely illustrations; Judy Ketteler who carefully proofread every page; and Lynn Flint, Nina Pearlstein, Marcia Goldstein, and Norine Mudrick from Greenwood, who oversaw the production of this book.

Finally, but not at all least, I thank my own sons, Joshua and Gabriel. Josh, with great patience, taught me to use the computer and cajoled a difficult program to do things its developer said were impossible. Both of them accompanied me in the field, but Gabe, particularly, was a constant companion and became, perhaps more than I, a part of the community. Thank you, sons, for your endurance!

Orthographic Note

I have chosen not to use the International Phonetic Alphabet but rather to follow the conventions of Khmer transcriptions into the Latin alphabet with English spellings where they exist (particularly Ebihara 1971 and Sam-Ang Sam 1995), French spellings when they have become conventionalized into English usage (such as with “Khmer,” pronounced “Khmaer” with a silent “r”), and my own approximations into English spelling when precedents vary or are not in wide usage. Although this decision may render transcription less precise, my intent is to make the text more accessible to nonlinguistically trained anthropologists and others. The following linguistic conventions may aid in pronunciation, though of course sounds in one language can never be conveyed precisely using the orthography of another:

th is an aspirated “t”

ph is an aspirated “p” not an “f” sound

r lightly trilled, as in Spanish

Many final consonants, such as “t” and “k,” may only be aspirated if followed by an “h”; this leads to a general dropping of final consonant sounds in English. “V,” “w,” and “b” are more similar to one another than they are in English. Several consonant combinations do not regularly appear in English, such as “km” and “ph”; nevertheless, both consonants are pronounced with no vowel sound before or between.

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Note on Place and Ethnic Names

There is some confusion regarding the place names Cambodia and Kampuchea and the adjectives Khmer, Cambodian, and American. In this work I use those terms as closely to the emic use as possible, recognizing of course that emic use varies among individuals and across time. For centuries, until April 1975, the name of the country was Kampuchea in their language and Cambodia in English (Huffman 1981). Other writers spell the original name of the people "Kambuja," meaning children of Kambu. From Kambuja it is easy to see the derivation of the French "Cambodge" and the English derivative of that. The Khmer Rouge, or the Pol Pot regime, changed the name of the nation to Democratic Kampuchea; in 1979 the Vietnamese changed it to People's Republic of Kampuchea; in 1989 the official name again became Cambodia. All but one of my informants refer to their country as Cambodia (pronounced closer to "Comboja," actually), and so I do here.

The vast majority of people from Cambodia are ethnic Khmer, and their language is Khmer; thus that term is used by many Cambodians and Americans to refer to all nationals of Cambodia. There are also, however, many ethnic Vietnamese, Chinese, Cham, and several smaller ethnic minorities collectively referred to as "Phnong," or "savages" (Ebihara 1971:55), as well as many ethnic mixtures. All of the adult refugees in Middle City speak Khmer as their main language; when speaking English they refer to their language as either Cambodian or Khmer and to themselves as Cambodians. The other ethnic groups within Cambodia, such as Cham-Malay or Khmer-Chinese, consider themselves and are considered by others to be Cambodians and would very rarely be called "Cham" or "Chinese" and then only to make a specific point. They refer to Vietnamese-Americans, who have been here longer and are more acculturated, as "Vietnamese." I have never heard the term "Cambodian-American" used by the members of this community, and so I do not use it, though that perhaps best describes the culture that is developing among them and well reflects the self-identity of many of the children.

Cambodians, like many people, use the term "American" to mean people of the United States. Again I follow emic usage here, despite the unfortunate imperialistic

connotation. The term “Black” or sometimes “Black American” is used by Cambodians, and thus here, for people of African or African-American ancestry. As the refugees in Middle City have little or no contact with actual Africans or other North Americans, these emic terms are clear in this context.

Braving a New World

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Chapter 1

Introduction

The 1990s may be the decade of refugees. The United States opened its doors briefly in 1975 upon the fall of Vietnam and again in 1980–1981 to Cambodian refugees, but world crises in the 1990s are precipitating the flight and displacement of more people than ever before. In the past few years we have sought, in different ways, to aid Kurds, Somalis, Bosnians, Haitians, Russians, Cubans, and others. A million or more Rwandans spilled over their borders in 1994, fleeing a most brutal and massive slaughter between Tutsis and Hutus. Never before in history has there been such massive flight of people, on such a global scale. The United Nations' High Commissioner for Refugees estimates there are more than 20 million refugees and displaced persons worldwide (UNHCR 1994).

Anthropology, as a holistic science of humankind, is uniquely suited to study the complex situation of refugees, who face chaos both during their period of flight and in their process of adaptation in resettlement countries. In the latter half of this century, anthropologists have increasingly applied their skills and knowledge to fields of service such as education, health care, and international development. Now refugees may be the neediest people of all, having lost everything and in danger of losing their very culture itself. Anthropologists can contribute both to the refugees and to the people who work with them by studying the traditional cultures of the refugees and their current problems, and by serving as culture brokers and translators between the refugees and their new cultural environments.

At the same time, it is also incumbent upon anthropologists to address the urban problems of our own nation. The United States is experiencing an urban crisis, our own situation of chaos, with deterioration of schools and an increase of youth gangs, violence, and homelessness. Refugees, despite their generally rural origins, are typically resettled in urban areas, often in the worst of urban decay. In their particularly vulnerable state, refugees may become either victims of or participants in those urban problems: they may struggle in inadequate schools, or they may drop out; they may become gang members or gang prey. By intensive ethnographic research, anthropologists can comprehend the refugees' situation from the emic perspective and thus help legislators and assistance agencies develop policies and

programs that can aid refugees both in maintaining their own cultures and in adjusting to life in the United States.

The study of refugees, for its part, has much to offer anthropology. For a variety of reasons, anthropology has, in recent decades, turned toward research at home. The proximity of a research population can enable us to stretch scarce research dollars to cover more research and longer periods of time. Third World countries are slower to welcome foreign anthropologists, preferring to employ their own. Proximate research is particularly advantageous in training the next generation, permitting regular supervision of graduate students in the field and providing senior researchers with their own carefully trained research assistants. Finally, and perhaps most importantly, studies of refugees lend themselves perfectly to the sort of long-term research necessary to an understanding of culture change. In refugee studies, anthropologists witness rapid and forced culture change and can also observe closely the consequences of policy decisions in resettlement, education, health care, and urban planning.

WHY CAMBODIANS?

Over one million Southeast Asian refugees have entered the United States since 1975 (USDHHS 1993:5); of these, approximately 150,000 have been Cambodians (Ebihara, Mortland, and Ledgerwood 1994:18). Until that time, the United States had very few Cambodians, some having entered as immigrants or students and some as Vietnamese in previous years. The largest numbers arrived in the years 1980–1982. By 1987, when I began my study, ethnographic research on Cambodian refugees was just beginning, and even the field of refugee research was new in anthropology.¹ Academic journals on migration focused on economic issues and immigration law, and refugee research in the United States tended to focus on larger groups, such as the Vietnamese. Cambodians, for reasons that will unfold in this ethnography, remained relatively ignored, in both the popular and the academic presses. Particularly because of the ethnographic dearth, I have chosen to develop the broadest possible portrayal of the life and culture of a specific refugee community. I intend this work to contribute to the development of a body of ethnography on refugee communities, an essential foundation for the development and testing of refugee theory.

There were other reasons for my choice of Cambodians. As recent arrivals, they were at the beginning of the process of culture change. I hoped to see, at that early date, which elements of their traditional culture were being maintained and which were already undergoing change, and what influences fostered or hindered their initial adjustment. Now the Cambodians have been in the United States nearly fifteen years, and it is possible to begin to examine the course of that change. This book focuses on the original ethnographic data collected between 1987 and 1991, but also includes material on more recent acculturation and some comparative material from other U.S. cities.

Attention has been called in recent years to the dangers of treating all Southeast Asian refugees as members of a cultural whole and to the necessity of understanding