

From Cambodians to Refugees

Cambodians are in America because Americans were in Cambodia. America's gradual entry into the Vietnam War eventually involved over 2.7 million American military personnel, left 58,000 Americans dead and tens of thousands wounded, brought societal conflict, and all at a cost of \$738 billion (Daggett 2010). Vietnam also suffered devastating consequences, as did neighboring Cambodia. After just a few years of war, Cambodia was in shambles, thousands were dead, and millions were without homes. After Americans fled the region in 1975, Cambodians experienced displacement, deprivation, and death, followed for some by flight from Cambodia and resettlement in America. Few could have predicted that refugees from a small, agricultural, and predominately Khmer and Buddhist nation would be resettled in a large, industrialized, and diverse country. Never had so many Cambodians fled their home to resettle in over nineteen countries across the globe, including China, New Zealand, Denmark, Argentina, and the United States.

From the first spread of prehistoric man across the globe to later population movements, seldom have migrations involved so many people and destinations in such a short period of time as the modern movement of refugees, including Cambodians. Before the 1975 communist takeover in Cambodia, few Cambodians had traveled outside their homeland, and only a couple hundred Khmer students, diplomats, and soldiers lived in America. By the early 1980s, however, after hundreds of thousands of Cambodians had fled Cambodia, there were large concentrations of Cambodians not only in Cambodia but in several Thai refugee camps and in Long Beach, California. Most were without resources, English, or familiarity with American ways.

Research with Cambodians

This ethnography provides a glimpse into the lives of Cambodian refugees in America and their Cambodian American children. The descriptions are written in the ethnographic present, and are based on data-gathering techniques including formal and informal interviews, tens of thousands of hours of conversation, and observation and participation in multiple settings. Before the 1950s, French scholars such as Adhémard Leclère (1914), George Coedès (1968), Louis Finot (1916), and Eveline Porée-Maspero (1962–1969) contributed most writings on Cambodia. After 1950, Americans contributed publications on history (Briggs 1951), language (Huffman 1970), and anthropology (Ebihara 1971).

The refugee crisis that followed Cambodia's turmoil in the 1970s was the catalyst for an extensive body of research by Americans on Southeast Asian refugees in Thailand's refugee camps and resettlement in America. Most of the work focused on refugees' physical and mental health, and much of what renowned historian Chandler calls "the revival, or more properly the birth, of twentieth-century Cambodian cultural studies" (1994: xi) was done in researchers' neighborhoods. Smith-Hefner conducted extensive research in the Boston area (1999), F Smith (1989) and Hopkins (1996) worked in the Midwest, and Needham and Quintiliani have written over the years about their research in Long Beach (2007).

Over the past three and a half decades, I have conducted research with Cambodians in their homes, schools, workplaces, and temples, spending thousands of hours listening and observing as Cambodians described, practiced, and explained their traditions and rituals. After receiving a doctorate in anthropology in 1981, I worked the next nine years in refugee resettlement offices at the local, state, and national level, serving with Khmer job developers, counselors, clerks, interpreters, translators, and volunteers to aid refugees with their immediate and long-term needs. I served as president of a county refugee resettlement forum, as a member of a state refugee advisory board, and as a consultant at the Philippines processing center in 1982. I was advocate, fictive kin, student, teacher, foster parent, board member, coauthor, business advisor, and temple consultant for Cambodians, who were warm and generous, offering food or drink on every occasion.

I shared with colleagues conducting research among refugees and immigrants who resided in their community a perspective different from that of traditional anthropologists who had transitioned from dependent students in the field to specialists back home with no one to contra-

dict them. Such a transition was not possible for researchers working with Khmer refugees who lived nearby and increasingly spoke for themselves in English. We were able to take a longer look at one another. As Cambodians became aware of how they were being perceived or described by Americans, they responded. They corrected me constantly, if not immediately. In addition, their stories were riveting, which led to another conflict with traditional academia: detached writing. Other scholars also found that research with non-refugees did not leave them untouched. Chandler wrote that he was “unready as a scholar to confront the enormity of recent Cambodian history,” finding the anguish of refugees in Thailand “very moving” (2010).

Assisting refugees also placed difficulties in following another traditional research aim: to affect those with whom the research is being conducted as little as possible. A number of researchers were employed by service agencies or worked as volunteers providing assistance to refugees. By definition, their goal was to help refugees change: learn English, gain American job skills, or become familiar with public transport. In this case, the change being instigated was considered advantageous by all those involved, including those receiving it. Initially seeing little difficulty in helping refugees with doing research because I was neither social worker nor applied anthropologist and was assisting refugees with anthropological awareness in doing what they wished, I soon realized that Americans’ and refugees’ visions of desired change often differed. In addition, I was pressed by refugees to take sides in their conflicts. When I refused, I was accused of doing so anyway, sometimes by several groups simultaneously. When I listened to one leader, I was seen as belonging to his group by both Cambodians and Americans, despite the number of other leaders I consulted. Increasingly, my simplistic view of “helping” refugees shifted as I realized how limited and powerless I was to effect change on their behalf. My goal remained the same throughout my years of employment with refugee agencies.

Americans were often unable to understand the experiences Cambodians had had, either in Southeast Asia or as refugees in America (also Beydoun 2004). Some Americans suggested it was time for Cambodians to forget the past, be grateful for resettlement, and move on with the future, but Cambodians said often that they could not forget what they had endured. Their experiences were inscribed on their minds and on their bodies; Sann pointed to his forehead every time he spoke of being struck on the head with an axe, and Prak grabbed his knee when he described being hit by Khmer Rouge soldiers. Cambodians occasionally said they disliked being questioned by Americans about their past and often resisted their questions or concealed information from them.

Americans who worried about being “used” by Cambodians often did not acknowledge the extent to which they themselves were using Cambodians for research, jobs, or spiritual or personal gratification through “helping” refugees or friendship with them. Cambodians viewed relationships through a different lens than did Americans; for example, definitions of “friend” differ between people who value equality and those who value hierarchy. I call the members of one family I met when director of a refugee program “friend,” while they call me “sister” or “auntie.” Their terms are more accurate, reflecting a relationship that has endured through time—valuable, usually satisfying, but occasionally tense and for them hierarchical.

Being employed in refugee services does not preclude doing ethical research with refugees, but it does necessitate looking squarely at issues and viewing refugees as rational, complicated, ambitious, and inquisitive human beings. Ethical research requires researchers to struggle against viewing Americans as able to give assistance and refugees in need of it; researchers need to explain their work as best they can and recognize refugee hierarchical distinctions and relationship constraints. Researchers must also protect the identities of those about whom they write without distorting data, a difficult task because meaning comes in great part from context. In describing conflict situations, it is especially important to conceal participants’ identities. I have maintained confidentiality while providing context by using pseudonyms for people both living and dead, moving them to different jobs and communities, and expanding the usual village of a traditional ethnography to the entire United States.

Communication was often difficult. Cambodians struggled to learn English, particularly those with little education in Cambodia and no experience with being students. Americans, in turn, were often impatient and intolerant of Cambodians’ poor English and often discounted Cambodians’ ability to learn. A woman who in 1984 said her husband wanted money for an operation “to make the fat on your stomach shrink” explained twenty-five years later that although she had never learned the name of that procedure, she became increasingly fluent in English, but that many of the Americans with whom she worked continued to talk with her “like I am stupid or cannot hear them.” Misunderstandings between Americans and Cambodians were common. Americans often spoke too rapidly and directly, and Cambodians often prefaced even negative responses with an affirmation—“Yes, I do not want to go to the store”—or agreed to arrangements to avoid offending others and then neglected to keep them.

Speaking slowly and softly and enunciating clearly helped communication, as did maintaining physical distance and avoiding prolonged

eye contact. Using language appropriate for new English speakers and repeating statements or questions were helpful, as were writing down instructions or arrangements and indicating one's lack of comprehension when it occurred. Although uncomfortable for speaker and listener, asking speakers to repeat themselves indicated interest and aided comprehension. Although it was sometimes uncomfortable to comply with Khmer expectations, such as not assisting with food preparation or eating with men while women served the food, Cambodians said they appreciated Americans respecting their customs.

Cambodians and I were informants to one another. I provided information about America, both while working and during evenings and weekends, and they told me about their lives and experiences. When Cambodians learned I wanted to know more about their traditions and lives, they facilitated data collection, talking at length and introducing me to informants who knew about particular events or topics. When they learned I wanted to know about Buddhism, I was taken to interview monks; about mushroom picking, to talk with mushroom pickers. When I asked about music, I was introduced to a man who made traditional musical instruments, and when I asked about fortune-telling, I was taken to have my fortune told. In these settings, Cambodians expected me to ask prepared questions and record the answers.

I tape-recorded informants or wrote down the information, and if I was unprepared, Cambodians often grabbed pencil and paper, demanding that I make a record, asking questions on my behalf or telling me what to ask, often taking notes for me. Over the years, as we watched one another struggle to understand the other's world, Cambodians "put a hook in my heart" in a traditional "weapon of the weak" to increase attention, services, and resources (Scott 1985). Attempting to bind me to them with endearing words, Cambodians told me how much they missed me even after a few days and how important I was in their lives. I responded in full measure, alternately overwhelmed, confused, sad, or comforted in reaction to the intentional and unintentional wounds that haunt human relationships.

Brief History of Cambodia

Cambodian refugees fled a country they said had been an empire, a republic, and a revolutionary communist regime before becoming a Vietnamese puppet state. Cambodia was then a United Nations client before becoming a constitutional monarchy. Cambodia is small in area and population. Comparable in size to Washington State, the country is

bordered south and west by Thailand and the Gulf of Thailand, north by Laos, and east by Vietnam. In the early 1970s about 80 percent of the Cambodian population of seven million was rural. Most Cambodians lived in villages of about two hundred inhabitants near streams on the central plain. Most were rice cultivators; many also had gardens, raised pigs, fished, and traded (Whitaker et al. 1973). Six cities contained less than 15 percent of the population, although they were expanding rapidly with refugees fleeing areas within Cambodia affected by the war.

Population density in Cambodia in the early 1970s was less than one hundred people per square mile. Today, some Cambodians refer to Cambodians who live in the central plain as “central Khmer” (*khmer kandal*). They are distinguished from Khmer Krom in southern Vietnam, Khmer Surin in northwest Cambodia and Thailand, and Khmer Lao in northern Cambodia. Cambodia is also home to Chinese Cambodians, Cham Cambodians, Vietnamese, tribal groups, and Europeans. Most Cambodians are Khmer Buddhists; the remaining 15 percent are Mahayana Buddhists, Cham Muslims, and Christians.

Cambodia’s history extends back many centuries. Archaeological evidence from 10,000 to 12,000 BP indicates the presence in the region of wanderers gathering, hunting, and fishing for sustenance (Higham 1989). By 4,000 BP, early people also cultivated rice, made pottery, and lived in permanent villages near lakes and rivers. Several hundred years later, residents made iron and bronze and operated a regional network of trade. An archaeological site in central Cambodia reveals similarities between prehistoric and modern Khmer physiology and lives, such as residing in stilt houses and eating a diet based on rice and fish.

Khmer legend traces the country’s origin to the union of a foreigner from India and a local dragon princess whose father ruled *Gok Dhlak*, a waterlogged island in southern Cambodia (Chandler 1983). In one version, a Brahman priest named Kaundinya shot an arrow from a magical bow at the princess, frightening her into marrying him. Drinking the water from the land, the princess’s father enlarged the region ruled by his son-in-law, called it “Kambuja,” and built a capital. By 2,000 BP, southern Cambodia’s early Funan polity had an extensive canal system, high population density and productivity, and complex trade. From India came concepts of governance, architecture, dance, music, literature, Hinduism and Buddhism, and a writing system. Society had become increasingly hierarchical, with a majority of farmers; a middle stratum of administrators, priests, soldiers, and craftsmen with more resources; and a few at the top who controlled the labor of the many.

By the ninth century, the center of power in the region had shifted north to the area of Siem Reap. Early in the century, King Jayavarman II

united numerous small polities, took the title “god king,” and was the first Angkor ruler to combine divine status with temporal rule.

For the next six hundred years, Angkor dominated Southeast Asia. Complex canal networks utilized topography to divert water from rivers into manmade reservoirs, and overflow channels collected water during monsoons so it could be dispersed when needed. The irrigation and transportation provided by the system facilitated an expansion in agriculture and population, whose size and power were evidenced by over a thousand temple ruins, including Angkor Wat and Angkor Thom.

Angkor Thom was the largest preindustrial city in the world (Fletcher et al. 2006). It consisted of an urban sprawl of at least one thousand square kilometers, with temples at its core, and was home to as many as 750,000 residents. Angkor’s control of water deteriorated over the years, however, and the polity was left vulnerable to floods and drought. Temple building projects and costly wars may also have drained the empire of resources and people (Buckley et al. 2010). With Angkor weakened, Thailand sacked Angkor in 1431 and killed many of the elite. Vietnam then invaded the region and imposed their own culture and language on the inhabitants of present-day Cambodia.

For centuries, Khmer rulers struggled against invasion and exploitation by Vietnam and Thailand, generally yielding land or power to one or the other and often using one neighbor to avoid the advances of the other (Chandler 1983). A respite from persistent attacks occurred during the time of King Ang Chan (1516–66) when the new capital, Lovek, became a major trading center, and Spanish from the Philippines, Portuguese from Macao, and Chinese, Arabs, Japanese, and Malay introduced new ideas and practices to the region. Invasions from neighboring regions again occurred; Lovek was captured by the Thai, and by the 1770s, Vietnamese settlers had moved into Cambodia’s Mekong Delta, an occupation that angers Cambodians to the present.

By the mid-1800s, Cambodia was shrinking in size and influence. The country’s freedom from ongoing depredations by its neighbors came from a country six thousand miles away that few Cambodians even knew existed. France was interested in Southeast Asian trade and resources and, fearing British competition, made Cambodia a protectorate in 1863. France left Cambodia’s ceremonial powers to the king, encouraged Chinese Cambodian involvement in business, used Vietnamese as administrators, and generally restricted the economic activity of ethnic Cambodians to food production, fishing, and crafts. Europeans tended to see Cambodia as a tranquil backwater populated by smiling, gentle people; one English anthropologist was harsher, describing Cambodians as “ugly, dull-looking people, diseased and under-nourished, cowed and

frightened, drably dressed in dingy black; with Buddha as their god, and opium as the way to Him" (Gorer 1936: 155).

Many French colonists were similarly dismissive, but whatever their reactions to Cambodians, French academics recorded the country's history and restored numerous temples. During their colonial rule of Cambodia, however, the French exploited Cambodia's resources, levied exorbitant taxes on the people, looted some antiquities, and provided education for only a few elite children. By 1954, a mere 144 Cambodians had graduated high school (Kiernan 1996). Cambodians benefited little, and traditional divisions between urban and rural and between the elite and the peasantry intensified. At the death of the Khmer king in 1941, the French appointed his nineteen-year-old great-nephew, Norodom Sihanouk, as his successor, assuming they could easily manipulate him to do their bidding. By 1950, however, King Sihanouk was advocating for independence, and with global pressures mounting against colonialism and anxious to maintain its holdings, France agreed to give up Cambodia as a colony.

After independence in 1953, Sihanouk became the dominant figure in Khmer political life, yielding his throne to operate as a politician but continuing to act and be viewed as a semi-divine royal exhibiting a concern for "his" children that contrasted sharply with French paternalism. Although modernization, educational opportunities, the middle class, and business expanded, Cambodians became increasingly unhappy with Sihanouk's arrogant and autocratic ways, government corruption, and the concentration of wealth among the king's family and cronies. Despite the country's problems, refugees later said they had appreciated living in peace during the years Sihanouk was in control.

The years of calm were threatened when civil war between South Vietnam and its communist opponents spread into Cambodia, and American military action expanded throughout Southeast Asia in support of the anticommunists. Worried about the consequences of war on Cambodia, Sihanouk cited a proverb, "When the elephants fight, the grass is trampled." He tried to appease both communists and anticommunists, allowing Vietnamese communists to establish bases inside Cambodia but not objecting to South Vietnam pursuing them. Disturbed by America's deepening involvement, Sihanouk cut off economic and military aid from the United States in 1963 and broke off diplomatic relations in 1964. Nonetheless, he was unable to halt foreign intrusions or the transport of weapons and ammunition across Cambodia into Vietnam. Cambodian disillusionment over the state of the country led to a coup against Sihanouk in 1970, but his successor, Prime Minister Lon Nol, was unable to deal with the country's problems, and Cambodians' dismay continued.

Trusting that his “friendship” with President Nixon would render Cambodia invincible, Lon Nol reversed Cambodia’s stance toward the United States and allowed America to turn Cambodia into a military staging area in its support of anticommunist South Vietnam. In 1971 alone, American military aid to Cambodia grew from \$20 million to \$180 million, and the bombing of invading Vietnamese communists within Cambodia increased. Between 1965 and 1973, the United States used almost a third more bombs than the Allies dropped in World War II, most concentrated on less than 25 percent of Cambodia, without the knowledge of Khmer leaders and the American Congress (Shawcross 1979).

Although American war rules decreed that targets such as religious buildings and ruins were not to be hit, the rules were often violated, for example, when pilots learned enemy soldiers were hiding in temples (Wood 2002). Cambodians painted “pagoda” on their roofs to prevent destruction, but often to no avail. An American pilot involved in the bombing said years later that Cambodians “had different feelings about pagodas than we did.” Khmer refugees disagreed, saying Khmer pilots and troops who benefited financially were content with the American presence, but the vast majority of Cambodians were not. One man said homes, villages, schools, and temples were wiped out by bombs and chemicals dropped by B-52s (large United States Air Force bombers), and skin, health, land, and forests were affected. He added, “We’re talking about people whose land had been passed from generation to generation.”

Despite America’s infusion of funds, military supplies, and advisors, the stability of Cambodia grew ever more precarious. The quantities of American economic and military aid actually overwhelmed Cambodia’s absorption capacity, resulting in corruption and chaos. Some officers purchased their rank, and thus many lacked talent or training to perform their duties. Supplies were often stolen, and soldiers were fed poorly and paid late or not at all; consequently, many deserted. Officers turned in lists of “ghost” soldiers who had died or deserted to collect their wages, turning the army into a literal “paper army.” With an ineffectual army in the field and massive bombing occurring in parts of the countryside, 35 percent of the population had fled to the cities by 1975. Phnom Penh swelled from half a million to three times that. Believing that faith would expel nonbelievers from the country, Lon Nol ordered Vietnamese communists to leave within forty-eight hours; in the hysteria, almost half were expelled, murdered, or detained. Weakened by incompetent and erratic leaders, Cambodia and Vietnam fell to the communists in April 1975. The American ambassador and a handful of diplomats and Khmer associates were airlifted by helicopter out of Cambodia, and on the seventeenth, on the Khmer New Year (*chol chnam thmey*), Cambodian communists took

control of the country and began a new reign; two weeks later, Vietnamese communists took over Vietnam. The war toll was considerable: hundreds of thousands dead, many more wounded, property destroyed, and millions of refugees. For millennia, the lives of Cambodians' ancestors had often been tumultuous and violent as they focused on survival. Their lives were to become so again, for the suffering caused by Cambodian leaders' incompetence and America's misguided military actions were surpassed only by the suffering inflicted by the new communist regime.

Before 1970, Cambodian communists, named Khmer Rouge (*khmer kraham*, or "red Cambodians" in French) by Sihanouk, were a marginal force influenced by Vietnamese communists or by Marxists and Leninists while studying in France (Hin Sithan 1992). Their leader, Pol Pot, described them as fewer than five thousand scattered and poorly armed guerrillas (Owen and Kiernan 2006), and observers said they had no hope of attaining power in Cambodia. By 1973, however, they had grown to number 68,000 cadre (referring to both individual and collective Khmer Rouge) (Becker 1986). Although the Khmer Rouge gradually took over Cambodia from the late 1960s and retained control of some areas until 1996, their rule over the whole country began with the 17 April 1975 takeover of Phnom Penh and endured until the Vietnamese invasion in December 1978. The Khmer Rouge consisted of a small elite led by Pol Pot, 120,000 soldiers, and 20,000 civilian cadres. Their goal was to restore Cambodia to what the Khmer Rouge saw as its former greatness by establishing an egalitarian social order, maximizing agricultural production, and replacing the family household with work teams.

The Khmer Rouge regime ended abruptly, when intrusions by the Khmer Rouge into Vietnam and long-standing enmity between the two countries led to Vietnam's invasion of Cambodia at the end of 1978. The 150,000 Vietnamese troops and several hundred Khmer escapees fighting with them met little resistance. The Vietnamese set up a government in Phnom Penh administered primarily by former Khmer Rouge, and the new People's Republic of Kampuchea focused on the restoration of order. Although Cambodians were again free to resume their lives, many fled their homeland. Cambodians took with them memories of what had occurred in Cambodia and talked among themselves about those experiences. As soon as they began learning English, they started telling Americans about their lives under the Khmer Rouge and flight from Cambodia. First, however, they waited in Thailand's refugee camps to hear about possible resettlement.

America's Migration History

If accepted for resettlement, Khmer refugees would join a nation of migrants whose mythology is that America has always welcomed oppressed people. Americans point to the words adorning the Statue of Liberty pedestal: "Give me your tired, your poor, / Your huddled masses yearning to breathe free." American leaders boast of immigrant ancestors, and Americans often note that the ancestors of all Americans were immigrants or refugees. In Tyrity's words, the refugee is "no oddity, caught in strange and impossible situations," but a "universal citizen" writing a story that could apply to any American (1981).

Both Puritans in the 1600s and presidents in the modern era have called America "a city upon a hill"; in President Reagan's 1989 words, a "God-blessed" place with doors that "were open to anyone with the will and the heart to get here." Yet America's immigrant mythology ignores the restrictive legislation that has shaped immigration (Johnson 2003) and disregards unwilling participants, such as slaves from Africa, conscripts from Asia, and Native Americans considered problems to be solved through displacement, education, or elimination. America's migrant reception has shifted between generous hospitality and indifference or rejection. Americans have long worried about immigrants being different and not learning American ways. Native-born residents of North America have always been cautious with newcomers, and often with reason.

The arrival of explorers, adventurers, and settlers into the New World after the fifteenth century brought violence and disease to the original immigrants who had migrated from Asia millennia before. Surviving Native Americans were then displaced by white Europeans, most from the English-speaking British Isles. These new immigrants established a world based on Protestant values of individual accomplishment, values that immigrants in the centuries since have been pressured to emulate. The bigotry Americans have displayed to immigrants has stemmed not only from immigrants' differentness, but from American assumptions about the superiority of their own values and their attempts to protect what they have considered their own resources and privileges (Steinberg 1989).

The largest migrant influx to America occurred from the mid-1800s to the 1930s, when millions of Europeans migrated, attracted by work and inexpensive steamship fares (Grognet 1981). America's industrial development resulted in the largest economic expansion the world had yet seen, and by 1920, one-third of the country's workforce consisted of foreign-born workers. However, the new arrivals made many Americans

uncomfortable. Controlling Native Americans and African Americans with restrictions and segregation, majority Americans were leery of newcomers who did not fit existing categories and instead spoke little English and observed unfamiliar customs and religions. An official commission concluded that immigration from southern and Eastern Europe should be strictly restricted because of its threat to American society (Dillingham Commission 1911).

Americans were also suspicious of migration from China and Japan. Although welcome when their labor was necessary, Asian immigrants were subjected to considerable discrimination when Americans saw them as competition rather than essential, particularly during the economic depression of the 1870s. In 1882, the United States banned Chinese altogether, and those already in the country were prohibited from applying for citizenship. In certain places and times, Asian migrants were prohibited from marrying or testifying against whites, attending public schools, forming corporations, owning real property, or hunting and fishing. Not until 1965 were Chinese allowed to migrate to the United States under immigration regulations applicable to other migrants. Through the centuries, Americans continued to prefer fair-skinned, European migrants with similar language, habits, and values.

Processing Khmer Refugees

The restrictions America placed on immigrants has applied also to refugees. The first influx of refugees to America, and also the first to be allotted resettlement funds by Congress, were twenty thousand Haitian plantation owners in the 1790s, escaping the slaves who had revolted against them (Grognet 1981). A century and a half later, the inhospitality America showed Jews seeking to flee Europe in the 1930s was reversed, and the 1940s and 1950s became known as the "age of the refugee." Refugees included concentration camp survivors, people fleeing communism, and escapees from Castro's Cuba (Paludan 1974). Another major movement of refugees occurred in the 1970s as Southeast Asians fled the communist takeover of Vietnam, Cambodia, and Laos. Public awareness of the fleeing refugees, international pressure, and extensive lobbying pressured the American government to increase the number of Southeast Asians accepted for resettlement. Unanticipated and unprecedented in America's history, America sponsored over two million Southeast Asian refugees between 1975 and 1990.

Few Cambodians were living in America when the Khmer Rouge took control of Cambodia. In addition to a small number of diplomats

in Washington, DC, and New York and military personnel training at various installations (Coleman 1987), there were several hundred students, a number at California State University in Long Beach, Fresno State College, and the University of California at Berkeley. Most Cambodians were relieved to be out of Cambodia when the Khmer Rouge took over, but a small group of pilots wished to return home. After discussions with the American government and the United Nations, 114 pilots and a few others were returned to their homeland (Coleman 1987). A Cambodian resettled in 1975 said he met the group in Camp Chaffee, Arkansas, where his father tried to talk them out of returning, but the group was determined to leave. Several of their names later appeared on Khmer Rouge execution lists, and none was heard from again.

With Cambodia closed to all but a few during the Khmer Rouge years, Cambodians in the United States worried for years about the fate of their countrymen. In 1979, however, thousands of sick and starving refugees straggled into Thailand with stories, most too extreme to be believed. As the stories multiplied and evidence of Khmer Rouge atrocities mounted, Cambodians in America reacted with shock, grief, and guilt. A graduate student at Cornell University said he found it almost impossible to continue his studies when he learned what had occurred in Cambodia, and if his professors had not delayed his studies, he could not have completed his degree. As Cambodians received pleas for assistance and sponsorship from relatives and friends in the camps, they described their relief at being able to help.

To be accepted for resettlement in the United States in the twentieth century, a person first had to be defined as a refugee. "Refugee" is a legal term in America and much of the world, with a status different from "citizen" or "immigrant." The United Nations and the United States define a refugee as a person who, "owing to a well-founded fear of being persecuted for reasons of race, religion, nationality, membership of a particular social group or political opinion, is outside the country of his nationality, and is unable to, or owing to such fear, is unwilling to avail himself of the protection of that country" (UNHCR 2014). Political factors are usual in the creation of refugees, as when struggles for power result in war or persecution against a particular group. Defining an individual as a refugee places that person in an international arena in which the needs and rights of national groups carry more importance than individuals, and decisions about refugees by countries with conflicting interests make refugee processing complicated and confusing. For example, the United States is more likely to define refugees as people fleeing countries considered its enemies than those fleeing nations friendly to America.

After arrival in the United States, refugees have the rights of citizens, with the exception of voting and journeying to other countries without travel documents. Rights include eligibility for social services, public education, and employment, and refugees are able to adjust their status after one year to permanent residency and, after four years, can apply for citizenship. Resettlement is permanent, and Khmer refugees were unable to shift resettlement to another country. The American president determines the number of refugees admitted to the country following procedures laid out by the Refugee Act of 1980.

The process for becoming legally defined as refugees began for Cambodians when they learned about resettlement interview procedures, usually in a Thai refugee camp. The first step was an interview with an officer of the Immigration and Naturalization Service (renamed in 2003 the United States Citizenship and Immigration Service, or ICE). Assisted by nongovernmental agency personnel, the officer determined eligibility. Acceptance for resettlement in the United States was enhanced if Cambodians had ties to Americans, service as a government soldier before 1975, or close family members already resettled in America. At each step in the eligibility-determination process, Cambodians had to convince skeptical officials their lives were in danger if they returned to Cambodia, give consistent answers, and appear truthful. Resettled Cambodians said they had considered the interview a life-or-death event, and they feared repatriation to Cambodia or retention in a Thai camp if they failed to obtain acceptance.

Refugees said the interview process and relationships between American officials and international agency personnel were confusing. One refugee asked a Swedish child-care worker for assistance in gaining American resettlement. Years later, the resettled refugee laughed, saying he had not realized that was out of her purview. Cambodians said they grew increasingly anxious as they awaited appointments. They prayed, scraped together money to make offerings to Buddha and the spirits, sought advice from those who had been interviewed, conferred endlessly about what to say, and practiced answering questions consistently. Cambodians often described their terror during interviews.

In 1982, I witnessed an immigration officer at the Philippine Refugee Processing Center reinterviewing two Khmer men after learning from the American Embassy in Thailand they had misrepresented their relationship, describing themselves as brothers (Mortland 1987). Trembling, the men stood before him trying to explain that while they did not have the same parents, they were brothers because of the suffering they shared. One man said in barely audible Khmer, "He saved my life. I saved his life. He is my brother." The officer said brusquely he would take away their

refugee status or keep them at the processing center; "That will teach you not to lie." At lunch, the officer told me he saw his primary job as catching refugees in their lies, "and they all lie." Hours later, the two were still shaking from their experience.

Khmer refugees said acceptance for resettlement brought them joy, more prayers, and new anxieties. Would they pass the physical examinations? Would someone discover information that nullified their acceptance? How long would they have to stay in the Phanat Nikhom Transit Center, Thailand's final processing center? Would other refugees bribe officials to take their seats on the bus to the airport or on the airplane? Several told me they were not certain they were actually going until the plane began to move away from the gate. Somath said his relief was brief; even airborne, he began worrying that the airplane might return to Thailand and he would be removed for one reason or another. Others said they were relieved when they exited the plane after a long flight and saw signs they could not read. "But," said one man soon after arrival, "I wasn't certain the signs were in English because I couldn't read them!"

It did not take long for American personnel to decide that Cambodians needed to be prepared for resettlement before going to America. Strikingly similar to early twentieth-century American assumptions that immigrant problems resulted from their dissimilarities to Americans, 1970s Americans concluded that reducing refugee difference would hasten their becoming Americans: in the classroom, refugees could learn to shed their subservience, dependency, and inherited ideas of hierarchy and become rational, democratic, hardworking, and self-sufficient. The emphasis of early twentieth-century educators remained: to teach refugees to be on time and self-sufficient. Early social activists considered learning English the major goal of Americanization and saw a failure to learn English as un-American, because immigrants could not then become "real" Americans. Americans thought English would bring migrants into the workplace, acquaint them with American cultural mores and laws, help free them from traditional values, and lessen their impact on Americans.

After the first Southeast Asians were accepted for resettlement in 1975, they were sent directly to four sites in the United States considered adequate for processing tens of thousands of refugees, including Camp Pendleton in California, Fort Chaffee in Arkansas, Fort Indiantown Gap in Pennsylvania, and Eglin Air Force Base in Florida. During processing, cultural orientation was offered to the refugees, and at Fort Chaffee, the local college set up English-language classes (Maher 2010). American interest in preparing refugees for life in the United States intensified as the resettlement of refugees expanded dramatically after 1979. Some Americans argued that dislocation and the stresses of resettlement required that

refugees receive preparatory education and assistance; others said refugees needed the preparation before entry into the United States or they would overtax state and local resources. The Refugee Act of 1980 addressed these issues by establishing centers on Bataan Peninsula in the Philippines, Galang Island in Indonesia, and Phanat Nikhom in Thailand where refugees spent an average of six months completing bureaucratic processing and receive English training and cultural and employment orientation (Consortium 1982).

A plethora of materials was prepared for training purposes. The Center for Applied Linguistics (CAL) developed survival-language phrase books and teaching English as a second language materials for adults and children; pre-employment training curricula, instructional and testing materials; and a series of twelve videotapes called *Working in America* (Cultural Orientation Resource Center 2012). In 1983, CAL staff in Washington, DC, shipped over two hundred pounds of teaching material to Southeast Asia each week, and by 1985, staff in Manila maintained a library of over 3,000 slides, 150 videos, and 3,650 books. Staff also offered a quarterly newsletter, a magazine called *Passage: A Journal of Refugee Education*, a national hotline, on-site workshops, employer guides, and information in Khmer on finding employment and family assistance.

In the processing centers, refugees were taught to change their living patterns, social structures, and values and replace ties to their culture and community with aspirations to individual independence and wealth (Tollefson 1989). They were told to “pick up English” in America after getting a full-time job, although little research suggests that having a job is more effective in learning English as a second language than is attending classes. Lacking fluent English does not always preclude employment; for centuries, migrants adjusted to America without learning English, and many jobs do not require workers with much English. In addition, migrants gain most of their adjustment information from fellow countrymen. Tollefson suggests that American policymakers wanted refugees to be taught to be satisfied with minimum-wage jobs, aspire to prosper through hard work, and stay off welfare; they would be perceived as less competitive with middle-class Americans. Claiming to teach democracy and independence, processing centers taught refugees to listen and obey. Many refugees said they resented camp restrictions on boundaries, class and work hours, and activities and the resettlement delay, but most complied with training and work requirements. By the late 1980s, over two hundred thousand Southeast Asian refugees had completed the program.

Before being flown to the United States, refugees were shown how to change money, navigate an airport, and get through customs, although most had no money and could not speak English. They viewed films on

how to sit in an airplane seat, use the toilet, and ask a flight attendant for assistance, but despite the efforts of Cambodians and teachers, most refugees were unprepared for the journey. Cambodians said later the journey was difficult. An older man said he did not eat for several days before the flight so he would not need the bathroom, and several said they did not use the toilet because they feared falling "down the hole." One man said he thought the swooshing sound meant the toilet was trying to grab him. An airline attendant said refugees often did not lock bathroom doors, and attendants kept trying to get them to do so until they realized that refugees were then getting locked inside. Several Khmer said they thought they would go crazy before the flight attendant got the door opened. Airline personnel posted instructions in the bathrooms on toilet, towel, paper, and soap use, but many Cambodians were illiterate or too anxious to read them.

Many Cambodians said they ate nothing on the flight, worried that the food would make them sick, disgusted at their first sight of non-Khmer food, or because, as one woman said, "I didn't think it looked like food." Some refugees smuggled food onto the airplane, worried that Americans would forget to feed them. Some spoke of their unease around people who looked different, one man saying, "I don't think the black stewardess liked me because she wouldn't help me." When I suggested she did not understand what he was saying, he repeated, "Yes, I don't think she liked me." Even compassionate flight attendants and passengers frightened the refugees. One Cambodian said, "I started to shake every time someone turned to talk with me because I didn't know what they were saying, and I was worried that I wouldn't do what they wanted me to do or I would offend them. Mostly, I tried to avoid looking at anyone." Cambodians breast-fed their babies, tried not to throw up, and prayed. Whatever their uncertainty, however, Cambodians said they were glad to be leaving camp life. Young Veata said no one in her family ate breakfast when they had a stopover in Japan, but she ate everything on her plate because she was "so glad to be going to America."

Refugee transportation was arranged by the Intergovernmental Committee for Migration, an organization that has administered loans to refugees for their transportation to resettlement countries since its founding after World War II. Refugees sign a promissory note stating they will repay the money, and the committee uses the loan repayments to make new loans. Both refugees and advocates expressed outrage that with virtually no resources, refugees were expected to repay transportation costs. One Khmer shook his head muttering, "I don't understand this country. People so generous, and then they take it back." When another Cambodian responded, "But you signed the paper to pay it back," he

replied, "Everybody sign the paper. Who wouldn't sign to get out of there?" An American said heatedly, "We spend billions to destroy their country, then millions to bring them to America, but refugees must pay for the airplane seat? Seems pitiful to me." Confusion about how the travel loans worked was considerable, and most Cambodians and Americans were unaware that the loans were being made by a nongovernmental organization and not the government.

Transportation costs were only one of the concerns Khmer refugees had in their new country.