



Introduction

Most resettled Cambodians are ethnic Khmer, but they include Cambodians who have Chinese, Lao, Thai, or Vietnamese ancestry. Although most Khmer refugees were formerly subsistence rice farmers in Cambodia, some were prominent in business, government, and the military and a few were urban students and workers. The approximately 150,000 Khmer refugees resettled in the United States after the mid-1970s included Theravada Buddhists, Muslims, Christians, Mahayana Buddhists, and practitioners of tribal religions. The majority of Khmer refugees were resettled in urban areas, and many continue to live there. Long Beach, California, has the largest population of people of Cambodian ancestry outside Cambodia, and communities of Khmer reside in other urban centers across the country, particularly in southern California, eastern Massachusetts, and the Puget Sound region of the Pacific Northwest. Over the decades, Cambodian Americans have increased in number, scattering to even more suburbs and towns. By 2010, over 275,000 people of Khmer descent resided in America (United States Census 2011).

The vast majority of resettled Cambodians are Theravada Buddhists, as over 90 percent of Cambodians have been for centuries. The daily practice of Khmer religion has been vitally important to the great majority of resettled Cambodians as they struggled to cope with the experiences that caused them to become refugees and attempted to survive economically and retain and reestablish traditional relationships, customs, and rituals. Decades later, the majority of first-generation Cambodians continue to spend most or all of their free time with one

another, socializing in Khmer, eating traditional food, and observing their traditions. Most second-generation Cambodian Americans do not share their parents' experiences or understand their beliefs and practices, but they continue to consider themselves Khmer and follow the religion of their parents.

Cambodian Buddhists in the United States explores the ways Cambodian refugees reestablished the rituals, personnel, and physical facilities of their traditional faith in America as they began arriving in the mid-1970s. To provide a context for discussing the establishment of Khmer Buddhism in America, this chapter briefly reviews the history of Khmer refugees, previous research with Cambodians, and my contacts with Cambodians since 1981.

A Brief History of Cambodia

For millennia, present-day Cambodia was home to hunters, gatherers, and fishermen who anthropologists think paid homage to spirits of the ancestors and the earth. Ancient rituals surviving into the modern era indicate that as the domestication of crops and animals became the dominant survival strategy and residents began living in permanent villages and engaging in networks of trade, they continued practicing rituals to appease the spirits around them (Porée-Maspero 1962–1969). With the development of a sophisticated and productive trading and social polity with high population density, high rice production, and a complex canal system, Funan was established in southern Cambodia around 2,000 years ago (Bizot 1976). Left behind is evidence of both Hinduism, a 4,000-year-old Indian religion consisting of numerous gods, texts, and rituals, and Buddhism, founded by the Buddha about 2,500 years ago.

By the ninth century CE, power in the region had shifted from Funan to Angkor and, from the ninth to the fifteenth centuries, King Jayavarman II and his Angkor successors oversaw an expansion of agriculture and population. Until the twelfth century CE, Hinduism was the state religion of the Khmer Empire, but waxed and waned in influence along with Mahayana and Theravada Buddhism, with temples (*wat*) alternating as ritual sites and displaying both Hindu and Buddhist elements (Chandler 1983). Buddhism developed in part in reaction to Hindu tradition and rigidity, providing its followers relief from the caste system. Over the centuries, Buddhism developed into Mahayana Buddhism, a branch of Buddhism emphasizing celestial Buddhas, bodhisattvas, and magical rites.

Theravada Buddhism arose later as a reform sect focused on countering the spirit beliefs and extravagances some perceived in Hinduism and Mahayana Buddhism (Lester 1973). In contrast to Mahayana Buddhism, Theravada Buddhism focuses on worship with a community of monks and encourages believers in acquiring wisdom, discipline, and deliverance from life's suffering. Cambodians molded Indian ideas into a unique form, with Khmer-style images of the Buddha prevalent as early as the seventh century. Two Indian gods often blended to become one, such as Shiva and Vishnu becoming Haraihara, a favorite god of the Angkorean kings, and local spirits were sometimes given the names of Indian gods (Chandler 1983). Khmer kings also named themselves after Hindu gods and the Buddha while claiming they were descended from the ancestor spirits (*meba* or *neak ta*) of the original settlers.

During the late twelfth to early thirteenth centuries, Buddhism gradually gained ground over Hinduism, and Jayavarman VII's regime marked a clear division between the Hindu past and a Buddhist future. A thirteenth-century Chinese envoy (Chou Ta-kuan 1992) described Pali-speaking Theravada Buddhist monks; an association of spirits with stones, soil, and water; a belief in the protective power of tattoos; and New Year games still present among twenty-first century Khmer Buddhists in America. Although continuing Hindu rituals and allowing Indian priests to preside over certain court ceremonies, Jayavarman VII saw himself as a Buddhist and a living Buddha. Rather than build temples for Brahman priests, he constructed libraries, hospitals, rest houses, roads, and temples for thousands of Buddhist monks. Temple art shifted from Hindu pantheon scenes to Mahayana and Theravada Buddhist themes with inscriptions in Khmer and Pali, Buddhism's sacred language (Harris 2005).

As Buddhism gradually eclipsed Hinduism, it influenced Angkorean society to be less hierarchical by placing more importance on lay religious participation and accepting local traditional beliefs (Higham 2001). The village temple was the cultural, educational, and social center of the neighborhood, and its monks the custodians of Khmer society and identity, providing a buffer between aristocrats and commoners. Yet hierarchy remained important, supported by Buddhism ideas that emphasized the importance of deferring to superiors such as the king, teachers, monks, and government officials (Houtart 1977). Although kings became benefactors to monks by donating food and land for monasteries, they continued to memorialize themselves through temple construction and maintenance.

Angkor, the world's largest medieval "hydraulic city," was apparently sustained and then ultimately overwhelmed by over-exploitation and the

detrimental environmental impact of the complex water-management network that supported its rice economy (Buckley 2010). Laborers totaled almost one-third of a million workers, a large proportion of the estimated Angkorean population. The excesses of Angkor kings may have led to a rebellion by over-worked and over-taxed workers who maintained the economy that supported the rulers' temple construction and maintenance. A Ta Prohm temple inscription states that 12,640 people served the temple, and more than 66,000 farmers produced the 3,000 tons of rice needed annually for the vast number of priests, dancers, and temple workers.

Angkor's decline intensified in the fifteenth century with pressure from its neighbors. Both Thai and Vietnamese invasions led to large-scale death and destruction as Khmer rulers resisted or yielded land or power to one neighbor or the other, often using one to avoid the advances of the other (Briggs 1951). By the 1770s, Vietnam occupied Cambodia's Mekong Delta. In the nineteenth century, the Vietnamese promoted Mahayana Buddhism among Cambodians, while the Thai advocated for Theravada Buddhism. With the approval of the Khmer king, monks from Thailand established a new Theravada Buddhist order in Cambodia called Thommayut. Although it received royal patronage, the order was less popular than the Mahanikay order practiced by most Cambodians, who viewed the Thommayut order as more Thai than Khmer (Harris 2001).

Cambodia's freedom from continuing depredations from Vietnam and Thailand came at the hands of a country 6,000 miles away. In order to gain an advantage over Britain in the region, acquire a land route to China's markets and trading posts, establish naval supply stations in Southeast Asia, and protect its own missionaries, France named Cambodia a protectorate in 1863 (Briggs 1951). France's greatest legacy to Cambodia during its colonialization was the exploitation of Cambodia's tax revenues and resources. Cambodians received few benefits in return. Primary education for children continued at temple schools, but the French did little to expand or improve the system and, by 1954, a mere 144 Cambodians had earned a baccalaureate degree (Kiernan 1996). In business and finance, the French encouraged Chinese Cambodian involvement, but restricted the practice of the majority of Cambodians to food production, fishing, weaving, and carving.

Leaving ceremonial powers to the king, and ruling primarily through Vietnamese administrators, the French "mummified" Cambodia by reinforcing its traditional monarchy and social structure (Kiernan

1996). They left intact traditional divisions between urban and rural Cambodians and intensified class differences. An exception to France's general disregard for Cambodia was its interest in Cambodia's heritage. French scholars studied Cambodia's history, identified ancient cities and works, and restored Angkorean temples. The French instituted Khmer language and Buddhism studies, established Pali schools for Khmer monks, and strove to give Cambodians pride in their heritage (Rajavaramuni 1984).

The French, however, had little regard for Cambodians or their religion. An anthropologist described 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). Louis Finot described Cambodian Buddhism as "a sweet religion whose doctrines of resignation are marvelously suited to a tired peoples" (Armstrong 1964, 30). Aware of French attitudes toward them, Cambodians responded to the French with demonstrations and violence, often led by Buddhist monks. Angered by France's policies, Cambodians were also displeased by French efforts to convert them to Christianity, although those efforts were as unsuccessful as those of a sixteenth-century Portuguese missionary who left after a year, claiming Cambodians refused to become Christians without royal permission.

When the Khmer king died in 1941, the French appointed his great-nephew, Norodom Sihanouk, to replace him. Japan's occupation of much of Asia in the early 1940s inspired the young king and many of his compatriots to consider independence for Cambodia. Surprised by growing nationalist demands, France granted independence to the country in 1955, and Sihanouk soon became the dominant figure in Khmer political life, yielding his title and royal ceremonial duties to his father and becoming a private citizen to better engage in politics. In sharp contrast to the patronizing exploitation of the French, Sihanouk exhibited concern for "his" children, and the 1960s saw an increase in modernization, educational opportunities, the middle class, and business.

As the Vietnam War between neighboring communist North Vietnam and anti-communist South Vietnam intensified, Sihanouk attempted to keep his country neutral, citing a proverb, "When two elephants are fighting, the ant should step aside" (Marlay and Neher 1999, 163), a proverb that has been variously ascribed to populations in East Africa, Thailand, and Cambodia. As the years passed, Sihanouk tilted to one side of the conflict or the other as he deemed necessary, saying, "I believe in sawtooth diplomacy" (*National Geographic* 1970). With the Soviet

Union and its allies supporting the North Vietnamese, the United States and its allies lined up behind South Vietnam, increasingly frustrating Cambodia's young leader. Sihanouk informed an American ambassador that he did not object to American forces engaging in "hot pursuit" of enemy soldiers in unpopulated areas (Bowles 1971), but he condemned American actions in the region which allowed the Vietnamese to establish bases inside Cambodia.

In 1963, Sihanouk ordered an end to American military and economic assistance and took control of Cambodia's banks, insurance, and trade. However, excessive government taxes and corruption enraged struggling Cambodians, and the incompetence of the army meant Cambodia could not prevent Vietnamese troop intrusions or the flow of war resources across Cambodia to Vietnam. By the late 1960s, as foreign investment declined, war on Khmer land expanded, and Cambodia's own communists increased in number, conditions in the country became increasingly chaotic and Cambodians' dissatisfaction with Sihanouk grew. Sihanouk had looked to Cambodia's Buddhist tradition for support, describing Cambodians as "socialists following the Buddha" (Chandler 1991, 161). Since the late 1950s, however, Cambodians had been exhibiting less respect for monks and temples, and monks were abandoning some restrictions and becoming increasingly involved in both pro- and anti-governmental demonstrations (Ebihara 1968).

As Cambodia was drawn more deeply into the Vietnam War, so, too, was the United States. By 1965, America had sent ground troops and economic and military aid to assist Vietnam and kept increasing its assistance over the next years. As the communists gained ground and American leaders and the public grew frustrated by the war, President Nixon shifted much of the assistance to Cambodia, seeing the country as a "key" to winning the war. Operating out of a large white building at the foot of Norodom Boulevard in Cambodia's capital, America dispensed military equipment and millions of dollars for Khmer troop salaries (Tatu 1990). Growing from \$20 million in the late 1960s, American military aid to Cambodia totaled \$1.8 billion by 1975.

Unable to halt the chaos in his country and lessen the displeasure of his countrymen, Sihanouk was overthrown on March 18, 1970, by Lon Nol, a top general and politician. Street posters depicting Vietnamese in tanks cowering before a glowing Buddha reflected Lon Nol's view of the world and, calling Vietnamese communists non-Buddhist infidels, Lon Nol ordered them to leave Cambodia within 48 hours. Cambodians turned on Vietnamese residents in their midst and, as war intensified,

half of the 500,000 Vietnamese civilians in Cambodia were detained or expelled, and many were murdered. Vietnamese communist soldiers, however, remained in force. Thinking his “friendship” with President Nixon rendered Cambodia invulnerable, Lon Nol resorted to full-scale war; however, the combat-toughened Vietnamese communists, and the Khmer communists, the Khmer Rouge, easily and repeatedly defeated Lon Nol’s army, an army that was suffering from incompetent leaders, lack of resources, desertion, and corruption.

When a ceasefire was negotiated in 1972, Vietnamese troops withdrew from Cambodia but the Khmer Rouge fought on, confident of victory. Exploiting Cambodians’ growing anger over poverty, governmental stupidity, and loss of livelihood and life, the Khmer Rouge expanded their control over two-thirds of Cambodia. Meanwhile, American leaders were determined to continue fighting in Cambodia, in the words of one, “the only game in town” in the struggle against communism (Tyner 2008). For much of 1973, the Khmer countryside was a free fire zone for American aircraft and, having turned the country into a military staging area, America made Cambodia “perhaps” the most bombed country in history (Owen and Kiernan 2006, 63), bombing 113,716 sites between 1965 and 1973 without the knowledge of Khmer leaders or the American Congress, killing thousands of Cambodians, and devastating much of the land (Shawcross 1979). Less than 25 percent of the total area of Cambodia was bombed, but on that land, more than one billion pounds of explosives were dropped during the early 1970s, more than three times the quantities America dropped on Japan in World War II (Etcheson 1984). A refugee wrote of villagers affected by B-52 bombs and chemicals: “Their homes, their villages, their schools, their temples were wiped out by the bombs,” adding, “We’re talking about people whose land has been passed from generation to generation” (Samkhann Khoeun 2003, 152).

The Americans military decreed that temples, temple ruins, and other religious buildings were not to be bombed under any circumstances, but Khmer and American pilots often violated the rules on hearing a building harbored enemy soldiers. One American pilot said Cambodians “had different feelings about pagodas than we did” and did not treat their sanctuaries as Americans do their houses of worship, adding that even their Khmer colleagues thought that, if the “enemy was using a pagoda as a sanctuary, he had to be driven out. If that damaged or destroyed the pagoda, so be it” (Wood 2002, 67–68). In response to the bombing, communist Khmer and Vietnamese troops moved deeper

into the interior of Cambodia, disrupting the rural population. In 1972, 35 percent of Cambodia's citizens were refugees in their own country and, by 1975, Phnom Penh had swelled from half a million occupants to three times that number.

Although American military intervention may have postponed a communist victory in Cambodia, it increased popular support for the Khmer Rouge (Kiernan 1996). Seeing that the war was lost, the American ambassador and staff left Cambodia in April 1975 by helicopter, taking a handful of Cambodians with them and abandoning the rest to their fate. Soon after, the Khmer Rouge took over the country. The war toll in Southeast Asia was enormous. Over 58,000 of the three million American troops who served in Southeast Asia were killed and 300,000 were wounded. In Vietnam, over one and a half million soldiers and two million civilians were killed (Rummel 1998) and, in Cambodia, millions of lives, traditions, and much of the country itself were destroyed.

Khmer Rouge

Immediately after their overthrow of the government, the Khmer Rouge sealed Cambodia off from the world. The full horror of Khmer Rouge rule, what survivors call "the Pol Pot time," was not clear until they were forced from power in 1979 and Cambodians fled to Thailand and Vietnam. It was soon evident that the Khmer Rouge had changed Cambodia from a pre-industrial society to a country where twentieth century rice farmers and urbanites lived as Southeast Asian foragers had 10,000 years before, scavenging for plants and small animals to eat. As Angkorean kings had done hundreds of years earlier to build their empires, so the Khmer Rouge controlled a multitude of workers to grow crops and build irrigation works for a new utopian society, unconcerned with the human cost of their actions.

On April 17, 1975, the Khmer Rouge evacuated Cambodia's cities, forcing people into the countryside to live as slaves, cultivating rice and building dikes, irrigation ditches, and reservoirs that never held water and roads that went nowhere. Currency, banking, postal services, schools, and other institutions of life were abolished, and society was literally turned upside down with educated Cambodians obeying illiterate Khmer Rouge soldiers. Starvation was common, and disease and injury went untreated. Estimates of the number of those who died at the hands of the Khmer Rouge continues to be disputed, but the Cambodian Geno-

cide Project of Yale University (2010) estimates that approximately 1.7 million Cambodians perished, 21 percent of the country's population.

Trying to impose their own organization on people "like a new god" (Picq 1984, 3), the Khmer Rouge broke a religious tradition that had existed intermittently for 2,000 years. Article 20 of the 1976 Constitution of Democratic Kampuchea permitted freedom of religion but banned all reactionary religions "detrimental to the country," effectively abolishing Buddhism, Islam, and Christianity. The Khmer Rouge made a special effort to exterminate Muslims and Christians, but also punished or killed anyone caught following Buddhist tradition, although Khmer Rouge leader Pol Pot had spent the first six years of his life in a Buddhist temple and two years as a monk. The Khmer Rouge abhorred Khmer Buddhist ideas about gender roles, family obligations, and property, and taught the young to hate their elders and spy on their parents, often removing children from their families. Heng Samrin, later a prime minister, said Pol Pot told him religion, monks, and rituals had to "be wiped out" (Kiernan 1996). In 1978, Cambodia's minister of culture told Yugoslav journalists that Buddhism was dead, clearing the ground for the founding of a new revolutionary culture (Keyes 1990).

Some monks welcomed the Khmer Rouge takeover. Assuming all was well, those at a temple in Phnom Penh left their compound in April 1975 only after Khmer Rouge cadre began shooting into the air and then into the monastery (Barron and Paul 1977). Cambodia's two head monks also welcomed Khmer Rouge soldiers, announcing over the radio their anticipation of better times, and calling on Cambodians' cooperation. However, when one of them, Venerable Huot Tat, told his listeners, "Now we have peace: put down your guns," a cadre rushed in and took his papers, said negotiation was now impossible, and left. The radio transmission was cut off and both Buddhist leaders soon perished. The Khmer Rouge were making it clear that they saw monks as useless parasites (Etcheson 1984).

Now allied with the Khmer Rouge, Sihanouk shifted from his support of Buddhism, saying "if we are faithful to the people, it does not matter what we do to the Buddhist monks" (Sihanouk 1980, 49). The Khmer Rouge varied in their oppression to Buddhist practices by region. Some immediately forced monks from temples without allowing them to undergo the obligatory disrobing ritual, while other areas experienced less rigidity or consistency in regulation. One monk told of disrobing on order of the Khmer Rouge, then putting his robes on again after being moved to another area, and finally being made to disrobe again after the

1975 takeover of the entire country. Eventually, he said, "In the refugee camp I put on my robes again, and I have not taken them off yet."

The Khmer Rouge compelled some monks to do manual labor. Thousands of other monks were sent to "reeducation camps" where they were tortured and killed. Some were forced to engage in sex or in other ways to violate their vows. While some resisted, living as laymen and occasionally performing secret Buddhist rituals for the sick or afflicted, the vast majority of monks died from execution, torture, disease, injury, or starvation. A Khmer Rouge leader admitted in late 1978 that few monks remained. In the early 1980s, the number of Khmer Buddhist monks worldwide was estimated to be less than 3,000 out of at least 60,000 existing several years earlier in Cambodia (Harris 2001).

Under the Khmer Rouge, temples were dismantled block by block or used as administrative centers, hospitals for the dying, food and supply warehouses, prisons, pig sties, and even torture centers, charnel houses, and extermination camps. Images of the Buddha were desecrated, decapitated, crushed, buried, or dumped into lakes or rivers; and over 90 percent of Cambodia's religious texts were destroyed (de Bernon 1998). According to surviving monks, by 1979 there was only one complete set of Buddhist scripture, the *Tripitaka*, left in the country (Franklin 1981). Not only were Cambodians deprived of their religious sites, personnel, accoutrements, and rituals for years, a generation of Khmer experienced a gap in their religious training, a span that for many was never bridged.

Becoming Refugees

Fearful of a Khmer Rouge takeover, thousands of Cambodians had fled Cambodia before the Khmer Rouge ascent to power in 1975, and approximately 6,000 were resettled in the United States from refugee camps in Thailand (Gordon 1987). Few Cambodians were able to escape their country during the Khmer Rouge years but, after Vietnamese troops invaded the country in the final days of 1978, Cambodia was in chaos, with the infrastructure destroyed, the population displaced, and food scarce. Hundreds of thousands of Cambodians soon fled their homeland. Virtually all had lost family, friends, work, homes, villages, and possessions, and many left Cambodia because they thought there was nothing to hold them there and they feared the Khmer Rouge and the Vietnamese.

Fleeing Cambodians were slowed by hundreds of miles of hills and forests; betrayed by guides; and threatened by bandits and Khmer

Rouge, Vietnamese, Thai, and Khmer soldiers resisting Cambodia's new government or fighting one another. The flight to Thailand often took weeks and brought additional heartache as traveling companions were lost to disease, accident, landmines, or violence. Thailand was hesitant to allow large numbers of Cambodians into the country but did so after their efforts to push refugees back into Cambodia brought international condemnation. In return for allowing Cambodians to cross the border, Thailand pressed Western countries and the United Nations to support refugee and border camps for immediate refugee care, and resettlement to a third country or repatriation to Cambodia as a permanent solution (Thompson 2010). Cambodians began fleeing into Thai refugee camps and "holding centers" supported by the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) and nongovernmental organizations supplying resources for refugees' basic needs.

By September 1979, half a million Cambodians were at the border (Magocsi 1999), many of them starving, diseased, and dying (Shawcross 1984). By May 1980, 130,000 Khmer refugees resided in Khao I Dang refugee camp alone, making it the largest settlement of Cambodians in the world outside Cambodia. Although refugees received food, chlorinated water, rudimentary health care, and resettlement in a third country for some, camp life was difficult. Rations were sparse, shelter and privacy were minimal, education was usually unavailable, discipline was strict, and residents had to queue for everything they received. Cambodians described the camps as prisons and said the staff saw them as anonymous and inferior.

Cambodians spoke of spending their time waiting for food and water rations, seeking information about prospects, avoiding trouble, and struggling with loss, anxiety, boredom, and feelings of isolation and humiliation. Most were unable to work or do much to improve their situation, and there was little recreation, gardening, or traditional craft diversions. Cambodians began to realize the consequences of their flight: resettlement, repatriation, or an uncertain stay in the camps. Traditional behavior and mores were fractured, with children often displaying habits learned from the Khmer Rouge rather than respect for their elders. With their country under Vietnamese occupation, numerous Cambodians opted for resettlement, and the United States eventually accepted close to 140,000 Cambodians as refugees. Most were transported to a processing center in Thailand, Indonesia, or the Philippines where they attended six months of English language and cultural orientation classes and received health clearances.

After arrival in the United States, Cambodian refugees were placed with Khmer or American sponsors. America's goal was for Cambodians to become self-sufficient and have as little impact on Americans as possible. Cambodians also wanted to become self-sufficient but, unlike Americans who wanted them to live *as Americans*, Cambodians wanted to live *as Cambodians*. They knew they had to acquire skills appropriate for the American workplace and learn about American culture to avoid offending their new compatriots, and most set out to do that. Cambodians also wanted to regain what they had lost: live with loved ones, act and be treated with appropriate Khmer behavior, and chat with one another in Khmer and without fear. They wanted to eat Khmer food and be surrounded by familiar possessions, and they wanted to again perform the rituals of their faith: to pray, make offerings, receive the ministrations of their religious leaders, and celebrate with other Cambodians.

Ethnographic Description and Cambodian American Studies

Scholarly writing in English on Khmer Buddhism is sparse; most early scholarly work before the 1950s was conducted by French scholars (e.g., Leclère 1899). French and American academics Milada Kalab (1968), Gabrielle Martel (1975), Marie Alexandrine Martin (1994), and May M. Ebihara (1968) wrote about culture in Cambodia in the mid- and later twentieth century and, although the work did not deal with Khmer Buddhism directly, their research contains significant data on the practices and importance of Buddhism in Cambodians' lives. The ethnographic work of anthropologist Ebihara (1968) on pre-Khmer Rouge Cambodia and historian David Chandler (1983), who has been writing about Cambodians since the 1960s, is invaluable to an understanding of Khmer life, as is Harris (2005) on Cambodian Buddhism.

The 1970s refugee crisis in Southeast Asia led to an explosion of research with Cambodians in refugee camps and overseas, primarily in North America, Europe, and Australasia. Most studies focus on refugees' physical and mental health and resettlement transition, difficulties, and revival, and some publications include information on Khmer Buddhism (e.g., Mollica 2004, Welaratna 1993). Although focusing on other aspects of Khmer resettlement life, Smith-Hefner (1994, 1998, 1999) has contributed significant data about Cambodian religious life, as have chapters in Ebihara, Mortland, and Ledgerwood (1994) and Lee (2010).

Other contributions on Khmer religion in America have included Marston and Guthrie (2004), Kent and Chandler (2008), Hansen (2004), Hansen and Ledgerwood (2008), and McLellan (2009) on Cambodians in Canada. A growing number of Cambodian American scholars have begun conducting research and writing about Cambodian resettlement life. Published work on the religious lives of Christian, Chinese, and Cham Cambodians and Khmer Krom in the United States is rare, one exception being Smith-Hefner's article on Christians (1994). Publications on resettled Cambodians and spirit beliefs and health include Hansen (1988) and Marcucci (1986).

Contact with Cambodian Refugees and Cambodian Americans

Cambodian Buddhism in the United States is based on three and a half decades of contact and research with Cambodian refugees and immigrants. Based on formal and informal interviews, tens of thousands of conversational hours, and observation and participation in multiple settings, the book focuses on what religion has meant to Cambodians as they built new lives and dealt with their losses. In 1981, I opened a refugee resettlement office for a national voluntary agency in the Puget Sound area of Washington that provided assistance to thousands of refugees and their sponsors. From 1984 to 1990, I directed a refugee resettlement program in central New York that served a community of refugees, including several hundred Khmer. In both offices, our staff helped with immediate and long-term refugee needs such as obtaining food, clothing, furniture, books, and information. American and refugee staff served as job developers, social workers, counselors, paper processors, volunteers, interpreters, and translators.

I was president of a large coalition of refugee service providers in the early 1980s and a member of New York State's Refugee Advisory Council from 1985 to 1990. I served as a consultant in the Refugee Processing Center in Bataan, the Philippines, for several months in 1982 and spent several summers in Cambodia in the mid-1990s. Over the past decades, I visited Cambodians in numerous cities and towns in homes, stores, donut shops, places that employ, train, and educate Cambodians, refugee resettlement and assistance offices, and public and private agencies. I also visited over forty temples, some hundreds of times. I related to Cambodians in multiple roles: as social worker, researcher, patron,

colleague, friend, advocate, fictive kin, student, and teacher. I was also foster parent, tutor, job trainer and developer, volunteer, board member of a refugee-run center, employer, co-author, business advisor, and temple consultant.

My welcome during visits at Khmer communities and temples throughout the country often stemmed from my relationships with monks or Khmer leaders known to temple personnel. At temples where I was unknown, I was welcomed as Cambodians welcome all who express an interest in them or their activities. At no temple did I ever feel unwelcome. If familiar to participants, I was immediately brought into activities and asked and told about family and the latest news or gossip. If unfamiliar, I was invited to see the sanctuary, the center for worship of the temple, or the altar (*asan*), or to sit and rest. Often, I was asked to stay and chat. As Smith-Hefner has noted, Cambodians were “unfailingly hospitable” and “generous beyond their means” (1999, xiv). From the first meal of *baba*, traditional soup, I have been offered food or drink at every home, temple, or celebration and, if my hands were empty, someone handed me something to eat or drink. At every temple I visited, the abbot, or head of the temple’s monks, offered me something every time he saw me and, in his absence, other monks or lay people provided hospitality.

Over the years, I worked with hundreds of Khmer colleagues serving as resettlement, employment, welfare, and health care staff at public and private agencies in numerous locales. I attended conferences, seminars, and workshops across the country, meeting with Americans, Cambodians, and other refugee leaders and workers. Through the years and in a myriad of locations, from local meeting rooms to a Senate hearing room in Washington DC, Cambodians offered information and opinions. Unlike traditional anthropologists who leave their uncertain dependency in a far-off land to become experts when they returned home with few, if any, informants to contradict them (Behar 1996), it was for me to leave Cambodians behind in the field. As their familiarity with all things American and for me grew, they provided information, conclusions, contradiction, and corrections as they pleased. A great part of my interaction with refugees involved our exchange of information: they taught me about themselves and their culture which I returned with information, advocacy, and assistance.

While scholars have traditionally attempted to write about people with as little emotion as possible in order to demonstrate their objectivity (Nordstrom 2004), writing about Cambodian refugees objectively is

virtually impossible. As Yu and Liu observed in the mid-1980s, research with non-refugees “does not seem to equal the intensity of emotions invested on Southeast Asian refugee studies” (1986, 497), and many have spoken of the emotional turmoil involved in talking with refugees. Listening to tales of pain and loss was often difficult, but I could not forget that my distress was not on the order of those talking to me. Anthropologists have also traditionally striven to affect their informants as little as possible, yet many researchers working with Khmer refugees were hired to assist them as refugee workers, teachers, and counselors. Cautious researchers can recognize that Cambodian refugees and immigrants seldom realize that research is being conducted with them and have little knowledge about research rationale, procedures, or consequences or the ability to refuse participation. I tried to inform them as best I could about my intentions, struggled against a bias to see Americans able to give assistance and Cambodians needing it, and took every step to avoid harming those who talked with me.

I have done that primarily by protecting the identities of those about whom I have written without distorting the data, an often difficult task because so much of the meaning of people’s activities derives from the context in which they occur. This is especially true of conflict, when context is most needed to understand relationships between people, and yet it is a situation in which identities can be easily revealed and people harmed. Misbehaving monks, greedy board presidents, or temple violence can easily be attributed to particular individuals and temples so, if identities are not already public, through print or digital media, I preserved confidentiality by using pseudonyms for people both dead and alive, moving actors to different communities, giving people different jobs or positions, and expanding the usual village of a traditional ethnography to the entire United States, thus obscuring identities that would be obvious in a smaller context.

I have little facility with languages, and Khmer has been a challenge since I first met Cambodians. I was fortunate in being able to spend much of my time with Americans who speak Khmer and Cambodians who speak English. I studied the language formally at various times throughout my research, and was able at one point to read stories and letters. Both my reading and speaking ability has fluctuated through the years; I sometimes communicated fairly well and understood the conversations around me; at other times, I understood what was being said but struggled to speak. Some Cambodians were poor teachers, more interested in learning English from me than in advancing my knowledge

of Khmer. Others have been ardent and strenuous teachers. As Cambodians' familiarity with English and with me grew, they were better able to know what I understood and to bridge the language gap between us. My limited ability with written Khmer and familiarity with Cambodians speaking English as a second language has also helped, as has a mutual willingness to decipher one another's attempts to communicate.