Cambodians in the Bronx and Amherst

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Recent History of the Cambodian Experience

Cambodia had been ruled by Prince Norodom Sihanouk (and before him by his father) until he was overthrown in a CIA-supported coup in March 1970. He was an extremely popular leader with the general public, although under his rule, he had allowed American forces to bomb suspected Viet Cong forts on the Ho Chi Minh trail within “neutral” Cambodia. The bombings of Cambodian villages during “Operation Breakfast” (as it was called by the Nixon administration) gave the small groups of Cambodian communists a common banner under which to gain popular support. Sihanouk’s replacement was Lon Nol, a man whose corruption and ineffectiveness as a leader also consolidated sympathy for the Cambodian communist movement (Khmer Rouge). After “liberating” portions of the countryside from 1972-1975, the Khmer Rouge, lead by Pol Pot, invaded the capitol Phnom Penh on April 17, 1975. Initially Cambodians warily welcomed the Khmer Rouge soldiers, most of whom were teenagers from rural areas. But the liberation from Cambodia’s hard times that many had been hoping for, turned out to be a nightmare beyond anyone’s expectations.

From 1975-1979, Cambodia was virtually destroyed by the autogenocidal practices of Pol Pot’s Khmer Rouge regime. The urban population was forced into the countryside to supply the labor needed to turn Cambodia into the ideal agricultural state the Khmer Rouge envisioned. Those they considered to be from the “elite” class—teachers, doctors, businessmen, civil servants, military and civil supporters of the former regimes—were imprisoned or executed immediately. Ethnic minorities such as the Chinese and the Muslim Cham were also persecuted. The rest of the population was controlled by fear, starvation and terror; much of which was enforced by the gun-toting youngsters the Khmer Rouge used to enforce their policies. Families were separated and put to work at forced labor under concentration camp conditions. It is estimated that between two to three million Cambodians were executed or died of torture, disease and starvation until the Vietnamese invaded and occupied the country in 1979.

The Vietnamese Invasion enabled many Cambodians to flee to refugee camps on the Thai-Cambodian border. Some made it to United Nations-run camps where they could submit documents and wait indefinitely to be considered for admission into a third country. Sponsors from the United States, Canada, Australia, France, and other countries
brought refugees to the West to rebuild their lives away from the war zone. Thousands of refugees still live in legal and illegal border camps in a kind of limbo. They cannot return to Cambodia, nor can they go anywhere else unless accepted by Third Countries—a process that is nearly at a standstill. Cambodian, Vietnamese, Lao and Hmong refugees are truly the survivors of devastating conflict in Southeast Asia and their presence in the United States is evidence of the destruction of an entire region by war. Like other war refugees, Cambodians have suffered the loss of their homeland, culture, and families. Unlike most others, Cambodians have survived a holocaust in which every Khmer family has been affected by that experience.

At this point in history, many Khmer refugees cannot return to Cambodia and are struggling to rebuild their lives in foreign and sometimes alienating environments. Though Vietnam withdrew its troops from Cambodia, the future of Cambodia is uncertain as four factions are struggling for power: Prince Sihanouk and the KPNLF (Khmer People National Liberation Front), the Republicans under Sonn Sann, Hun Sen (the present leader installed by the Vietnamese and a former Khmer Rouge leader), and the Khmer Rouge itself. Some fear that if the Khmer Rouge are allowed back into power, there will be another holocaust. The Cambodian communities in Amherst and the Bronx are testimony to this spirit of survival and the struggle to begin again while living with the past.

Most of the nine thousand or so Bronx Cambodians live in one of approximately thirty tenement buildings distributed on twenty streets. Most arrived between 1981 and 1986, and were resettled by sponsoring agencies in New York who helped them get apartments, jobs, and English classes in the Bronx. These buildings, which have seen generations of newcomers, are like miniature villages: neighbors go from apartment to apartment visiting each other, kids play in the courtyard outside, sarongs on clotheslines run between windows and the Khmer grocery stores are practically right downstairs. This has aided their ability to continue some of their cultural traditions, but has somewhat isolated them from interaction with the larger community. However, those Khmers who have remained in the Bronx over the years (many have moved to the suburbs in Lowell, Providence or to California) are becoming more visible members of the community by owning businesses, building community centers and maintaining a Buddhist pagoda.

The Cambodians in Amherst came to the United States between 1981 and 1988 and were almost all originally from the same village in Cambodia—Kokolor in Battembang province. Therefore, many of the five hundred or so Cambodians living in Western Massachusetts are related to each other in some way. Cambodians in this area have managed to recreate some of their village structure, although like all Cambodians here, they have lost many family members to war, or left them behind in either Cambodia or the camps in Thailand. Cambodians
here are sponsored by area churches and have close relationships with American friends and sponsors. Many are working at farms, factories, colleges, or in shops, and have contact with the American community on a regular basis. However, many Cambodians in Western Massachusetts miss the benefits of living near a large Cambodian community where it is easy for them to get the kinds of food, clothing and videos they enjoy. Some complain that they miss their own people and feel isolated. Most live in housing developments such as Amherst Crossing, Brittany Manor, Watson Farms, Puffton Village and Hampton Gardens and recently several families have bought their own homes.

**Personal Statement**

I have been working with Cambodians in Western Massachusetts and Bronx, New York for almost three years on a volunteer social service level, a documentary level, and on a personal level. I create photographs to record the history of the Cambodian refugee experience with hopes that it will be an effective tool in educating and informing about the victims of war who are now living in our neighborhoods. I hope to create a symbol of remembrance for Cambodians and the global community; to help us never to forget the genocide that occurred in Cambodia and the subsequent displacement of thousands from their homeland, culture, and families. I am interested in examining the process of healing emotionally, culturally and spiritually from loss in two diverse Cambodian communities: an urban community and a semi-rural community. In a time when racism and anti-Asian violence is increasing in the United States and in Massachusetts in particular, it is my goal to show these photographs in areas where many Cambodians now live, to increase awareness, respect and sensitivity to the circumstances that have brought Cambodians here. These photographs also celebrate the spirit of survival that has enabled Cambodians to begin new lives here in the United States while living with their memories and the losses of the past.

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Voeun Suy and her daughter, Sophol, cooking corn outside their apartment in Amherst, MA (Summer 1988).
Mrs. Bou and her relatives collecting cans and bottles for redemption money. They send their earnings to family living in Cambodia (Amherst, Spring 1988).
Sang Sokcheat Sisowath, a descendant of the Sisowath royal family, in her Bronx, New York apartment (Summer 1987).
Srey, a high school student, on her wedding day (Bronx, Summer 1986).
Ry Ruon in Khmer history class at Amherst Regional High School (Spring 1988).
Sithy, Tony and Sambath at their foster parents’ Bronx apartment. Some were former child soldiers during the Pol Pot regime (Winter 1986)
Chhoeuth Phok playing violin for his father (Amherst, Winter 1987).
Khmer Buddhist monk on the New York City subway (Fall 1986).