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ABSTRACT

Although the Southeast Asian refugees are regularly referred to only as Vietnamese, many are Cambodians, people different from the Vietnamese. It is true that Asian people have much more in common with one another than they have in common with non-Asians. While there are many attitudes and manners which Vietnamese and Cambodians share resulting from similarities of economics and geography, for instance, it is just as true and very important to human relations to recognize that Cambodians have a distinct and proud culture. This paper, composed by Cambodian individuals, is directed to Americans who hope to relate successfully to Cambodians. Quotations opening each section are taken from conversations with Cambodians who have made or are now making the adjustment to American life. Various sections informally cover topics such as Buddhist ethics and attitudes, similarities and differences between Vietnamese and Cambodians, behavior patterns such as patience and compliance, notions of idealism that Cambodians have about the United States, social standards, the concept of informality, patterns of responding such as tact, diplomacy, and withdrawal, the concept of sharing, manual labor, and adaptability. (Author/AM)

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Cambodians in America

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The cover drawing by Chhuoen Kem depicts one of the imposing stone heads at Bayon, the temple at the center of Angkor Thom. The ancient Cambodian capitols of Angkor Thom and Angkor Wat include some of the most impressive religious monuments in the world.

CAMBODIANS IN AMERICA

Either for brevity, or from genuine ignorance, the Southeast Asian refugees are regularly referred to only as "Vietnamese." In fact, many are Cambodians - people different from the Vietnamese.

It is true that Asian peoples have much more in common with one another than they have in common with non-Asians. There are many attitudes and manners which Vietnamese and Cambodians share (resulting from similarities of economics and geography, for instance). It is just as true, and very important to human relations, that Cambodians have a distinct and proud culture.

For Americans who hope to relate successfully to Cambodians, the Los Angeles County Commission on Human Relations offers this paper. Cambodian individuals have generously given their time and shared their personal experiences with the Commission in order to help Americans and Cambodians understand and appreciate one another. The quotations opening each section of this paper are taken from conversations with Cambodians who have made or are now making the adjustment to American life.

BUDDHIST ETHICS AND ATTITUDES

"More than 90% of Cambodians are Buddhist. Whether they are very devout or not, Buddhism is a strong influence in their lives."

Buddhism as practiced in Cambodia (Theravada Buddhism) is more like the older forms of Buddhism than that of Vietnam (Mahayana Buddhism). A central belief of Buddhism is that one's behavior in the present life has a bearing on one's condition in future rebirths - reincarnations. Because the spirit may be reborn in animal as well as human forms, Cambodians are generally reluctant to harm any living thing. (Although they will eat meats, Buddhist Cambodians will not butcher animals. Those jobs are performed in Cambodia by Chinese, Khmer-Islam or Vietnamese.)

Buddhists believe that the way to gain release from the cycle of rebirths is to abandon desire, ambition, craving, longing, and selfishness. This is not to be taken to the extreme of self-denial, but rather in the pursuit of the middle path, moderation in all things.

Buddhism rejects not only killing, but also stealing, lying, gambling, being unchaste, or taking strong drink. The tendency toward honesty may lead Cambodians to regard strategists, or canny and clever people as devious and corrupt.

The middle path of life, encouraged by Buddhism, is not intense or compulsive. Material gain, time-tables, achievement of status, even obedience to elders are approached without apparent effort by Cambodians. In times of peace, life in Cambodia was relatively easy. The land provided food, people were willing to share; there was no need or inclination for longterm planning. Cambodian children are generally allowed to be free of responsibility as much as possible. They are encouraged to learn obedience

and to care for themselves, but they are under no pressure to contribute to the family income or prestige.

Cambodian quietness is reflected in soft speech and light movements. It may require great effort to hold a conversation with a Cambodian, (especially a Cambodian woman) above the clatter of a typewriter. Generally, expressions of emotion are made only in private. Emotions are not shameful to Cambodians but, again, moderation is the rule. Extremes of emotion, or exaggeration, are not accepted.

SIMILARITIES AND DIFFERENCES

"Cambodians have two-part names; Vietnamese have three-part names."

Both Cambodians and Vietnamese traditionally speak and write the family name before the given name. For instance, the family name of Mr. Kreng Viradet (Jones John) is Kreng (Jones). When only one name is used, it is the given name, Mr. Viradet. A Cambodian wife takes the given name of her husband (Mrs. Viradet). Some Cambodians who have settled in the U. S. have reversed the order of their names, and have become accustomed to the use of their family names (Mr. & Mrs. Kreng), American style. A comma following the family name helps to avoid confusion (Mr. Kreng, Viradet).

Cambodian names are translatable into things of beauty (for women) and virtues (for men). Among the better educated people, the names are often not Khmer (the Cambodian language) but Pali. Pali and Sanskrit are the languages in which Buddhist prayers are written and spoken; Pali and Sanskrit are to Buddhism as Latin was to Catholicism. Sometimes extra syllables are added to names for a more pleasing sound.

Many words derived from Pali or Sanskrit have similar pronunciation in the Cambodian, Thai and Laotian

languages. The systems for writing these languages, however, are very different. The Vietnamese language, which has Chinese roots, is totally unrelated to Khmer, in both spoken and written form. French and English are the languages most likely to be used for conversations between Cambodians and Vietnamese.

In physical appearance, Cambodians may be quite different from almond-eyed, straight-haired, olive-complected, slightly built Asians. Some Cambodians, not a few, have round eyes, wavy hair, darker skin, and robust builds. These features are favored in men; the slighter build is favored in women.

Spoons, not chopsticks, are the most often used eating utensils. When spoons are not practical, chopsticks or forks are used.

PATIENCE/COMPLIANCE

"Cambodians are very patient. They are also very trusting. They will comply with everything another person says until they learn that the other person is taking advantage of them. Then they will go away and have nothing more to do with him. Compromise in such a situation is difficult for a Cambodian."

* * * *

"Cambodian society is very authoritarian. Communications all go in one direction--from superiors downward. The parent for example, does not need to thank the child for anything. But the child always thanks the parent."

Americans, in relating to Cambodians, frequently find themselves in unaccustomed positions of authority. As host, or sponsor, or new friend, the American's opinion is likely to be accepted unquestioned. Americans in such situations have found it very difficult to learn what Cambodians' preferences are.

IDEALISM

"Is it true that in America, if you work hard and work well, you will be rewarded without having to flatter the boss or do special favors to please him?"

Cambodian newcomers, as a rule, believe absolutely in American freedom and justice. They come here expecting to see the noble ideals practiced in pure form. The expectation is, of course unrealistic. While it may be disappointing to learn that America has its share of selfish people and bad people, Cambodians generally maintain an openness. To those who do not wrong them, Cambodians tend to be kind, gentle, and trusting.

SOCIAL STANDARDS

"The more traditional Cambodians think ladies should not wear pants, or makeup, or loud colors."

* * * *

"When we gather socially, men talk with men and women talk with women. Women must not intrude into the men's conversation."

* * * *

"When Cambodians learn that we own our own home here, they think we must be rich. Most of them have no experience with banking and mortgages."

In many ways, Cambodian life is like that of another era here in America.

"We leave our shoes at the door when we come home or when we enter a friend's home. We usually go barefoot in the house; but if others keep their shoes on, no one minds."

* * * *

"Cambodians do not like things to be business-like among friends. If you stay in my home, we would not think or talk about sharing the expenses. It is a matter of pride."

Sharing the expense of a meal out, a relatively common American practice, is contrary to Cambodian custom. Any person suggesting lunch or dinner out is assumed to be the host. In an American family a loan might be made in a businesslike manner to protect the borrowers dignity or to develop a child's sense of responsibility. Such a transaction would seem unfeeling to Cambodians.

Many cultural contrasts must be expected. If there is willingness to learn and tolerance of social standards other than our own, these contrasts need not lead to misunderstandings, offenses, or conflicts.

FORMALITY

"I will continue to call you 'Mrs. Smith' until you ask me to call you 'Mary.' This is to show respect."

* * * *

"We do not use given names in addressing a Cambodian elder or superior, because that would be disrespectful. Instead, we use terms such as 'brother' or 'sister', even though we are not related by blood ties."

* * * *

"We were raised to be very aware of the other person. If I am standing in the hallway talking and I see you coming, I will move out of the way, so that I do not inconvenience you the slightest. You will not have to excuse yourself, or go around me."

Cambodians share with other Asians a formality in relationships. In all relationships the elder or the person of superior status is accorded respect, even though they may be strangers and regardless of personal worthiness.

The traditional Cambodian greeting is a bow with hands clasped together. Body contact is considered crude. To touch another person's head is not only rude, it is an offense to his spiritual essence.

TACT/DIPLOMACY/WITHDRAWAL

"Even among good friends, we do not say 'no' to one another. If a friend of mine just came to Los Angeles from a distant city, I would have to assess for myself whether he is too tired to enjoy going out for dinner. If I were to ask him, he would never refuse my suggestion. This is because he doesn't want to hurt my feelings."

What Americans might call non-responsiveness may be the Cambodian's very subtle way of saying 'no.' If a Cambodian does not keep an appointment or if he does not follow through on a plan, it does not mean that he is irresponsible. He may, instead, be communicating that he does not feel capable of doing what you ask and wishes you would find someone else to do it. This less direct communication is intended to save both parties embarrassment.

In Cambodia self-assertion is rarely encouraged. By American standards Cambodians are shy and non-assertive. If a misunderstanding occurs among friends, Cambodians typically do not seek a solution through interaction. Instead, they tend to withdraw and permit time to calm the upset.

SHARED LIFE

"We don't have much money, but we send some to our cousins who are students."

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"I believe that there is very little mental illness among Cambodians, and that the extended family has much to do with mental health. We don't express hostilities in public, but the family helps us to work out these feelings. The family gives us moral support."

Cambodians grow up learning to share. Each morning in Cambodia Buddhist monks go from home to home asking for food to share with fellow monks. It is still common for Cambodian boys to spend a number of months living as monks - in gratitude to their parents. Meanwhile, the boy's family, while giving food to monks, knows that a member of their family is receiving food from other families. The Cambodian culture is one of interdependence, not of individuality.

Sharing is total among Cambodian friends. Ownership is of little significance; among friends, "make yourself at home" is meant quite literally.

OPEN HOUSES

"When I first came to the United States, the neighborhood seemed strangely quiet; I didn't see or hear the neighbors. Everyone stayed in their own homes with the windows and doors closed."

* * * *

"I heard that a Cambodian home here was burglarized because the family left it open while they ran a short errand. They had not learned that they have to lock windows and doors when they are not home."

In Cambodia, particularly in the countryside, homes are kept open during the waking hours - you see and hear neighbors all day. There is shared life. The idea of securing property against intruders will be new to many Cambodians. People drop in to visit without advance notice, and most entertaining is spontaneous. Any person in a Cambodian home at dinner-time is expected to stay and eat, whatever the circum-

stances.

MANUAL LABOR

"I work twelve hours a day, six days a week, in manual labor to support my family. I tell the refugees how much I make and they are impressed. I must remind them that it is very hard work. Someday I would like to have an office job again, but now it is not possible."

Scholarship is greatly prized among Cambodians and, consequently, there is a strong preference for desk work over crafts and other labor. This aversion to physical labor should be understood as something more than a simple snobbery.

Many highly-educated Cambodians who once had servants to attend to their needs have adapted to a very modest life style in this country. They have accepted whatever employment they could find and applied their energies to building the future. On occasions when there is a choice of activities, such as in recreation, Cambodians are not likely to favor handcrafts or tinkering.

ADAPTABILITY

The Cambodian character is one of openness, patience, and trust. They are hopeful about new lives in America. They are very appreciative of any assistance given them. They respect cultures different from their own. These traits can ease the way to good human relations.

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