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ABSTRACT

This study of the unusually high level of labor force participation in the Hawaiian Cambodian community includes descriptions of what Cambodians do in Hawaii, demographic descriptions of the community and household units, a description of the influence of the welfare system on the Cambodian community, and ethnographic descriptions of the lives of six individuals. Data were gathered through a 26-question survey and 11 personal interviews. The following findings about Cambodian labor force participation are discussed: (1) Cambodians in Hawaii have a higher labor force participation rate than other refugee groups and the general population; (2) Cambodians in Hawaii have a very low unemployment rate compared to other refugee groups and the general population; and (3) over 50 percent of Cambodian households in Hawaii are fully self-supporting, compared to 36 percent nationwide. The following possible reasons for the high employment rate are discussed: (1) availability of plentiful jobs in the service sector that require minimal training; (2) fewer language problems; (3) pressure from service providers and peers; (4) lower expectations than members of other ethnic groups; (5) emigration of many who do not want to work from Hawaii to California; (6) relatively long stay of Cambodians in Hawaii; (7) creativity in self-employment; and (8) a tradition that encourages women to work outside the home. Statistical data are included on three tables. The appendices comprise the following materials: (1) six personal narratives; (2) a copy of the interview questionnaire; and (3) a list of four references. (FMW)

CAMBODIANS IN HAWAII AND THEIR RELATION TO EMPLOYMENT AND WELFARE

by Tom Riddle

Cambodians in Hawaii and their Relation to Employment and Welfare[1]

by Tom Riddle
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May 1988

Introduction:

This study began as an attempt to document what appeared to be an unusually high level of labor force participation in the Hawaiian Cambodian community compared with refugee groups in other parts of the country. In the course of the study, which took place from February until May of 1988 in Honolulu, the data generated made it possible to expand the study to include descriptions of what Cambodians do in Hawaii, demographic descriptions of the community and household units, a description of a few of the ways that the welfare system is influencing the Cambodian community in Hawaii, and a few ethnographic descriptions of the lives of individual Cambodians that were put together by the informants and myself.

Background Sketch of Cambodians in Hawaii

On April 30, 1975 what remained of the South Vietnamese government surrendered to the North Vietnamese communists; about two weeks before that, on April 17, 1975, Phnom Penh, the capital of Cambodia, fell to the Khmer Rouge communists and the Pol Pot

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[1] In addition to the Cambodians mentioned in the appendix who were willing to share their thoughts about their lives in the U.S.A. with me I would like to thank Mr. Hongly Khuy, the Cambodian consultant of the Honolulu Mutual Assistance Association Center for his assistance and encouragement in writing this paper; Mr. Dwight Ovitt, the State of Hawaii's Assistant Refugee Coordinator of the Office of Community Services' Refugee Resettlement Program who gave me access to his office's library and who answered my questions about refugees in Hawaii; Dr. Goeff Hayes of the University of Hawaii at Manoa's Sociology Department who gave me very helpful suggestions for rewriting earlier drafts of this paper; and finally the Hawaiian Cambodian Community as a whole who made me feel like I was part of the family at their picnics and dinners.

Regime, or as it would later be called in the American media, "The Killing Fields", began in Cambodia. Perhaps as many as two to four million of Cambodia's 1975 population of eight million people died between 1975 and 1979, the year that Vietnam invaded Cambodia and large numbers of Cambodians fled their country for neighboring Thailand where the Thai government agreed to give them temporary sanctuary until the western countries could accept them for resettlement.

Today in Thailand there are about 23,000 Cambodians who are classified as "refugees" and are thus are eligible for resettlement. The Western countries however, in what has been called "compassion fatigue", have been hesitant to resettle all of these refugees. In addition to the refugees in Thailand there are more than 250,000 Cambodian "displaced persons", who are not eligible for resettlement because the Thai government has decided that no officials from other countries can interview them for possible resettlement (Refugee Reports 1987:6). Today the Thai government can, with the agreement of many pro-refugee groups abroad, claim that the western countries have not lived up to their promise of resettling the Cambodians whom the Thais gave a safe "temporary" sanctuary.

The Office of Refugee Resettlement (ORR) estimates that of the 851,000 Southeast Asian refugees resettled in the United States since 1975, 140,321 of them have been Cambodians (Refugee Reports 1987:8).

In order to help the states bear the burden of resettling

Southeast Asian refugees, the federal government's Office of Refugee Resettlement reimburses states for their share of aid to families with dependent children (AFDC) during the first 31 months following a refugee's initial entry into the United States. The ORR also bears the cost of state supplements paid to aged, blind, and disable refugees who are eligible for the Federal Supplemental Security Income (SSI) program on the same basis as citizens. Finally, and most significantly, ORR will reimburse to these states the cost of paying special cash assistance for "needy refugees"--termed "refugee cash assistance" (RCA)[2] for 18 months after the refugee arrives in the U.S. (U.S. Department of Health and Human Services 1987: 27). The states, especially in recent years, however, were urged to place refugees in a job before the end of that 18 months. Part of the federal government's logic was that the sooner refugees work the more money is saved and that money plus the resulting "proven resettle-ability" of the Southeast Asian refugees would allow more refugees to be resettled. The other part of the federal government's logic was simply to save money that could be spent on other government programs.

Some resettlement workers and refugees have expressed the view that refugees need their first 18 months in the U.S. not to begin working a job that they may be unprepared for or not interested in, but rather to study English, attend classes and generally adjust to American life before entering the work force.

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[2] Refugees and service providers often label any and all financial refugee support, "welfare."

This paper examines refugee views on the pluses and minuses of welfare. The ways in which refugees have used their "18 months," and dependency rates after that initial period will also be discussed.

Methodology

The data collection, which was conducted only in English, began with a one-page survey form of 26 questions (see appendix). This was used as the basis of 11 interviews with members of 11 different households that included a total of 42 Cambodians. Other in depth discussions produced at least some information about the employment status, family size, length of residence, and welfare dependency of almost every Cambodian in Hawaii.

The Cambodian community was, on the whole, a joy to work with. I attribute their tremendous cooperation to three factors:

1.) Cambodian society places a high value on harmony and generosity, so my informants, by and large, were simply inclined to be helpful.

2.) Simply because I enjoy their company I have gone on many Cambodian picnics, and attended lunches, dinners, and other social events during the nine months I have been in Hawaii. I have come to be seen, I think, as a peripheral member of the Cambodian community.

3.) I worked for five years in the refugee camps of Southeast Asia where I met two of the people I interviewed, so the Cambodians

here, I think, see me as a friend who will do what he can to help them. One of the people I met in the refugee camps is now one of the most respected members of the Cambodian community here and one of my best friends, Mr. Hongly Khuy. He, more than any other person in the Cambodian community, is responsible for the success of this study and yet he is responsible for none of the errors that this study may contain.

As data collection progressed I found that my informants were volunteering much more information about themselves and the refugee community than I was asking for. I therefore decided to take the sentences that I had jotted down when they answered my questions and organize them into short vignettes with an introduction. I then gave those short descriptions, averaging two single spaced pages, to my informants and asked them if I had described them correctly. My informants were on the whole delighted to have themselves described in print and to have their words written down on paper. One person said, "Oh goody--now I'm gonna be famous." Another said, "If I die this will tell about my life." Two people read what I had written about them as carefully as if they had hired me to write their wills, changing an adjective here, putting in a qualifying clause there. So in some ways my informants and I co-authored the appendix.

There were, however, a few problems. Five of the people I approached for interviews refused to participate in the survey. One person I later learned was embarrassed because the survey would have brought out information which would embarrass his or her

family. One person told me about his life in a very general way, but then when I asked a specific question like: "When will you graduate?" I was told, "I won't answer that question, it's none of your business." Two people, whose comments I typed up and presented to them for their approval, told me that I could not use their names in connection with anything that they had said. Their requests have been honored.

A Demographic Description of Cambodians in Hawaii

→ There are 122 people in the Cambodian community in Hawaii; that number includes seven non-Cambodian spouses and the children of mixed marriages (see Table 1). It is possible that there are other Cambodians here, but considering the tremendous comfort that Cambodians appear to take in the Cambodian community as a whole, it is unlikely that I have missed more than a few people.

→ There is an unexplained high percentage of males in the 5 -- 9 age group. My informants were at a loss to explain why there are 20 boys aged five to nine and only three girls. One informant related a Cambodian folk belief that after a war more males than females will be born.

→ The population is young with a median age of 24 . The median age of adults is 34. 36 percent of the population is under 15.

→ The Office of Refugee Resettlement estimates that there were 7,600 Indochinese refugees in Hawaii as of September 1987, just 0.2 percent of the 828,400 Indochinese who have been admitted to the U.S. since 1975 (U.S. Department of Health and Human Services 1987: A-14). Cambodians represent the smallest group of Southeast Asian refugees in Hawaii. There are approximately 5,500 Vietnamese refugees (and another 1,500 Vietnamese immigrants) and between 2,000 and 2,300 Laotian refugees (personal communication: Dwight Ovitt).

Table 1 Population of Cambodians in Honolulu

Age	Male	Female	Total
0 - 4	6	4	10
5 - 9*	20	3	23
10 - 14	5	6	11
15 - 19	4	9	13
20 - 24	1	2	3
25 - 29	8	6	14
30 - 34	7	8	15
35 - 39	11	6	17
40 - 44	1	4	5
45 - 49	5	2	7
50 - 54	0	0	0
55 - 59	2	1	3
60 - 64	0	1	1
65 +	0	0	0
60 - 64	0	1	1
65 +	0	0	0
	70	52	122 **

* this unusual grouping was double-checked with my informants and found to be correct
** includes 7 non-Cambodian spouses

→ Although ten states have a smaller total population than Hawaii, fourteen states have a smaller Southeast Asian refugee population. Hawaii thus appears to be as attractive to Southeast Asians as it is to other peoples of the Pacific basin.

→ There are 17 families that comprise a husband and wife and children; they account for 64 percent of the total Cambodian population.

→ There are 6 widows who live with their children and/or other relatives.

→ I counted 23 households with children, including single-parent families. The households average 2.4 children. There are three families with five or more children; informants consistently reported that a large family is difficult to support financially.

→ There are 3 legally married couples with no children.

→ There are 8 households that consist of either people living alone or of couples who are not married.

→ Only two Cambodian families live outside of Oahu, everyone else lives in Honolulu. The greatest concentration of Cambodians is in the crowded and relatively low-rent district around Kapiolani Boulevard between the McCully and Date Street areas. There, however, does not appear to be any attempt on the part of the

Cambodians as a group to cluster together. Several families told me that they will move into better housing in other parts of the city as soon as they can afford it. Their apartments tend to be small, not air-conditioned and, by middle class American standards, crowded, with sleepers outnumbering beds.

Other Survey Results and Analysis

Before discussing employment and welfare I will discuss some of the other results of the survey.

→ No one that I talked to subscribed to an American newspaper or magazine (some of the Cambodians who have married Americans do probably subscribe) although about a third of those interviewed claimed to regularly read the newspaper or watch the television news.

→ Respondents were about evenly divided in their response to the question, "Do you think that Cambodians in Hawaii are successful?" Generally the people who viewed Cambodians in Hawaii as successful were those who were themselves successful or who, because they were attending classes, believed that their job-related success was only a matter of time.

Those who said that Cambodians are not successful said that too many people were still dependent on government aid for the community as a whole to be considered successful.

One respondent was decidedly negative believing that because of the U.S. government's policy of early employment at the expense of education many Cambodians were stuck in dead-end jobs, and that those same people were believing in an empty dream if they thought they were living for their children because their children were becoming so "American" that they were no longer Cambodian. Naturally many Cambodians, including some who have commented in the appendix, would disagree with this, believing that they were slowly moving up the American ladder of success and that their children were retaining the important parts of Cambodian culture.

→ Everyone interviewed said that they attended Cambodian get-togethers as often as possible. About once every month or two the Cambodian community, under the leadership of the man the Cambodians call "President of the Cambodian Association", has a picnic or dinner. The position of "President of the Cambodian Association" is an assumed position for which someone volunteers. These affairs are always well attended and serve to unify the community. Usually every household brings one or two dishes of Cambodian food or soft drinks, with a noticeable shortage of beer or hard liquor at the day-time picnics. I have not seen any drunkenness at the evening dinners. The food is served communally and even if lunch or dinner begins at a specific time the food may be nibbled over the course of an afternoon or an evening.

In the course of an afternoon the children and young men might swim, play volleyball, or fish. The women tend not to engage in sports or more active recreation, rather, they tend to cook, "talk-

story", or, to the irritation of some of the men, play cards all afternoon.

Occasionally matters of concern to the community will be discussed. The male and female heads of household will discuss a subject until a consensus is reached. A strong priority is placed on the solidarity of the group and thus far neither religion nor politics has divided the Hawaiian Cambodian community. This is in sharp contrast to Cambodian communities in other states, something that the leaders of the Hawaiian Cambodian community are well aware of.

After the picnics some of the Cambodian families like to go out to a movie together.

When Cambodians from other states arrive in Hawaii or they are resettled from overseas they are invited to join the picnics and dinners by the president of the Cambodian Association or some other member of the Cambodian community. The Cambodian Association will also act to help new-comers to the community find housing, employment, buy a car, enroll in classes, etc. The importance of the psychological and physical support that Cambodians in Hawaii give each other probably contributes greatly to the likelihood that most individuals will find a niche in Hawaii and the example of the other Cambodians no doubt contributes to the work ethic of the Cambodian community here. I frequently detected a note of pride in the community during the course of my survey and some of the informants' comments that appear in the appendix echo this. There is a feeling of pride in the closeness of the community, in the

moral fiber of the community, and in the lack of political divisiveness. Community pride becomes especially apparent when Cambodians contrast their community with some Cambodian communities in California where it has been said that Cambodians gamble away their welfare checks, where couples arrive divorced so that they can collect aid to families with dependent children (AFDC), and where there is too much drinking.

The solidarity of the Hawaiian Cambodian community can be contrasted to that of another recent Southeast Asian migrant group, the Laotian community, where only 39 percent of the population according to a recent survey participates in any Laotian organizations (Atipas 1987:17).

→ Almost all the people I interviewed received the Refugee Cash Assistance grant (again, popularly called welfare) for the full 18 months permitted by the federal government's Refugee Cash Assistance program. This is consistent with national trends and should not necessarily be considered negative. The Cambodians I interviewed view their 18 months, not as a government-paid vacation, but as a valuable time to learn as much as they can, be it English, or another skill. As one respondent, whose comments appear in the appendix, said, "Welfare made education possible." To quote from Proposed United States Refugee Admissions for Fiscal Year 1988, released in September 1987, page 35:

> Most refugees are making economic progress and moving toward economic self-sufficiency, but their initial use

> of public assistance is high, a pattern which appears to have resulted from the following . . . factors:
>
> First, . . .Instead of seeking employment immediately, newly arriving refugees spend as much time getting education and training as possible.
>
> Second ...more of the recently arriving refugees come from rural areas and possess fewer language and job skills applicable to an industrialized economy.

No one reported that they were ready to move into the job market after that 18 months without furthering their education, even though many did. Two university students said that welfare made the start of their formal education in the U.S. possible.

→ With the exception of two families where the mothers are staying home to take care of their babies, families where the mothers are collecting AFDC, and households where the wife is elderly, every Cambodian wife is working at least part-time.

→ Half of the adults surveyed said that they had finished high school in Cambodia, and four adults were enrolled in universities in Cambodia in the early 1970s. Only one Cambodian refugee here graduated from a university in Cambodia.

→ The 22 working adults whom I was able to attain data on have been in the U.S. for an average of 6 years.

→ Only 10 Cambodians, my data indicated, have migrated here from the mainland. Most of them listed their reasons for coming as marriage or friends. One man came here as part of an exchange program between the University of Minnesota and the University of Hawaii; one man and his family were transferred here by his company; and two couples where transferred here with the military. No one came here because of new employment opportunities.

At least five families have migrated from Hawaii to the mainland, which would fit the general Southeast Asian refugee trend to migrate from Hawaii. The Office of Refugee Resettlement has calculated that in a recent year Hawaii's refugee population had a net out migration of 72 people (U.S. Department of Health and Human Services 1987: A-16).

→ At least ten members of the Cambodian community have become U.S. citizens. Others told me that they plan to become citizens soon to make international travel easier.

→ One informant said, "those who tasted education in Cambodia want it here, those who did not don't care." That was generally backed up by the survey. Of the four people in university now, three of them they attended at least one year of university in Cambodia, the other, and youngest one, attended junior and senior high school in this country.

→ Only one person I contacted felt that his English was adequate for reading and writing in every situation. There was no correlation between the amount of education a person has had in this country and the feeling of having become completely comfortable with spoken and written English. Most people--from housewives, to secretaries, to university students--say that English remains a major problem. The degree of the problem varies from the people who say that they cannot express themselves to their doctor, to those who say that after many years of speaking English they still do not always understand what native speakers are discussing or laughing about among themselves.

With one exception, Cambodians told me that if their English was better they would have climbed further up the economic ladder by this time or be better students.

Only a very few old people do not speak even conversational English. A few parents expressed their concern that their children would forget the Cambodian language and a few children told me that they have indeed forgotten how to speak their mother tongue.

Only a few respondents said that they could confidently, albeit slowly, fill out complicated forms.

The high English ability of Cambodians in Hawaii no doubt helps account for their high rate of employment. The Office of Refugee Resettlement in its 1987 Report to Congress reported a similar finding,

> English proficiency was found to effect labor force

participation, unemployment rates, and earnings. Refugees who spoke no English had a labor force participation rate of only 9 percent and an unemployment rate of 29 percent. For refugees who spoke English well, their corresponding labor force participation rate was 61 percent, and their unemployment rate was 15 percent.

Employment and Welfare

Employment

Both the Cambodians surveyed and the United States Government base what can be called "successful resettlement" in the United States largely on employment. That is, being employed and independent of the welfare system, or at least on the way to independence, is considered a proper and worthwhile goal that can be called "success". Education is highly valued in the Cambodian community, largely because a good education, it is believed, will lead to a good job. A good job and the resulting financial rewards will allow one to fulfill all one's responsibilities and be judged a success by the community.

Most Cambodians, like most people in Hawaii, work in the service sector (see Table 2). I counted a total of 49 full-time jobs and two part-time jobs held by 46 working Cambodians; there are more jobs, 51, than working Cambodians,46, because five people work two jobs. Although certainly most of the people who work more than 40 hours a week do so because they feel they need the money,

one informant who works 80 hours a week claimed that to sit at home in the evenings would be too boring.

The Cambodian community has, considering its recent entry from a rural and war-torn country, a high percentage of its work force, 37 percent, working in skilled jobs. Also with 13 out of 46 working people self-employed the community shows a good deal of industry and creativity.

Table 2 Occupational Classification of Economically Active

*=skilled	male	female	Total
Artist/embroiderer		1	1
Brewery worker		1	1
Cake decorator (part-time)		1	1
Clothing store clerk		1	1
Dog Groomer (self employed)		1	1
Food processing worker		4	4
Food service worker	5	6	11
Forklift operator	1		1
Handicraft maker		1	1
Military	1		1
Outside domestic worker		2	2
Parking lot attendant	1		1
Security guard	1		1
Shopkeeper	1		1
Window washer	1		1
*Baker	1		1
*Cashier	1		1
*Contractor (self employed)	1		1
*Doctor	1		1
*Fish nutritionist	1		1
*French teacher		1	1
*Hair stylist		1	1
*Home sewing (self-employed)		5	5
*Mechanic	1		1
*Mechanic (self-employed)	1		1
*Nurse		1	1
*Secretary		1	
*Social Worker (part-time)		1	1
*Taxi driver/owner (self-employed)	5		5
Total	23	28	51

Five people work two jobs.

The labor force participation percentage (see table 3) for Cambodians as a whole in Hawaii is a high 68.7 percent in spite of the fact that a large part of the potential labor force are full-time students. The percentage is pushed so high because of the number of working women.

Table 3 Labor Force Status (all persons 15+)

	male	female	total
1. Employer	0	0	0
2. Self-employed	8	6	14
3. Wage or Salary Worker			0
full-time	12	17	29
part-time	0	2	2
4. Unpaid Family Worker	0	0	0
			0
5. Unemployed (looking for work)	0	0	0
6. Unemployed (not looking)	1	0	1
			0
7. Sick or disabled	1	0	1
8. Retired	1	1	2
9. Full-time Student	10	6	16
10. Domestic Worker (housewife)	0	2	2
Total	33	34	67

	male	female	total
Categories 1-6	21	25	46
Total unemployed			1
Total employed			45

	male	female	total
Labor force participation (percent) (Lfp=categories 1-6 divided by 1-10 times 100)	63.6	74	68.7

U.S. Sept. 1986 Labor Force Participation (percent) 65
source: Bureau of Labor Statistics, Department of Labor

Eight Cambodian adults are attending some kind of classes. Four of them are full-time university students and all of them

work part-time. One adult is a part-time university student; one studies vocational training full-time. Two adults study English and one of those is taking a citizenship class two nights a week.

Almost none of the working people show a correlation between their present employment and what they did in Cambodia. The three exceptions are a car mechanic, a doctor, and a carpenter who has since learned to be a contractor. Two of the four Cambodians in university are pursuing degrees that they began in universities in their homeland.

Most of the people I talked to who work unskilled jobs have resigned themselves to them, which does not mean that they don't like their jobs. One man told me, "People can go up the system step-by-step, but for me there was only one step and that was into the job I am in now. My hope is that my children will do everything and I will do everything for my children." He is hoping that his young children will attend college.

Other wage earners in their 30s who have been in the U.S. for 5, 6, or 7 years and have only had unskilled or semi-skilled jobs are still hoping that they will get what they consider good jobs when they complete their education.

At least two men hope to open businesses of their own if they can raise enough capital.

At least one woman plans to enter the work force when her young children begin elementary school, "Life now, staying inside

all day, is very boring," she said.

Welfare

Only five households subsist entirely on welfare. Two of these households are made up of elderly people, one person claims a medical reason, and two women are widows with dependent children.

More than half of the Cambodian families in Hawaii do not depend on any kind of welfare-related government aid, be it food stamps, cash assistance, medical assistance, or help with housing. As noted earlier, large families tend to still be dependent on some form of government aid. Although I am unable to specify exactly what kind of government assistance most Cambodian families in Hawaii receive, 46 percent of the cost of caring for the newly arrived refugees is spent on medical care (personal communication: Dwight Ovitt).

Of the couples involved in receiving some kind of government support about one-third of them are not legally married. The temptation for a man and woman to stay legally unmarried so that they can receive some financial aid either for their own education or so that they and their children can be eligible for AFDC is simply too great for these couples to resist. A few of these couples have had some kind of Cambodian wedding ceremony and are recognized, at least on one level, as married by the

Cambodian community, but they, again, have not been legally married. They believe, an informant told me, that if they are ever going to better their lives they have to save as much money as possible by what ever means necessary so that they can one day move up the economic ladder.

This is where, it would seem, lies the real and potentially devastating influence of the welfare system on the Cambodian people in Hawaii. It is possible that a "culture of poverty" where a life based on government support will become the norm. There are however several reasons to believe that this will not happen.

1. Cambodians in Hawaii are on the whole uncomfortable in using the system in this way and rationalize their present behavior by believing that they and the system will eventually be better off because of it. In several cases at least one person in the relationship expressed sadness that he or she was not legally married. The emotional and legal security of a legal marriage is still, on the whole, desired. Like all societies Cambodians have an "ideal" image of themselves and they like to think they are at least partially living up to it. Presently this "ideal" still asserts that they are different than "the Americans" and one aspect of this difference that they are proud of is the close Cambodian family that generations of children born out of wedlock might destroy.

There is currently a debate within the Cambodian community

about the wisdom of being married outside of the legal system. There is indeed some pressure from within the community for couples who live together to get married.

2. The high value that the Cambodian community places on education will encourage the children who are being raised on some kind of government assistance to get an education that will lead to employment and make it unnecessary for them to depend on government aid. Also, as previously mentioned, the closely-knit Cambodian community looks up to those who have achieved some job-related success. As the members of the community who are now in classes graduate and move into higher-paying jobs, those who are still receiving government support will be encouraged to move up the ladder. I suspect that a few couples will legally marry when one or both partners graduates.

Summary and Conclusions

Cambodian refugees in Hawaii appear to be an unusually successful refugee group if success is judged by the rate of employment. The ORR reports that, according to their October 1986 survey, for refugees 16 or older the labor force participation rate was 41 percent, compared to an equivalent rate of 65 percent for the overall U.S. population (Office of the U.S. Coordinator for Refugee Affairs 1987). I have calculated (Table 3) that the labor force participation percentage for Cambodians in Hawaii is 68.7, slightly higher than the U.S. population as a

whole.

The Cambodian community in Hawaii also has a low unemployment rate. The ORR report states that the 1986 overall U.S. unemployment rate was 7 percent, while the overall unemployment rate for surveyed refugees age 16 or older was 16 percent (U.S. Department of Health and Human Services 1987: 107). In the Cambodian community in Hawaii I could only find one person who was not working because of dependent children, medical reasons, or education and he is a 19-year-old man who recently arrived in the U.S. from Vietnam as a participant in the Orderly Departure Program. As an immigrant he is not eligible for Refugee Cash Assistance.

Over 50 percent of Cambodian households in Hawaii are fully self-supporting verses an ORR reported average of 36 percent nation-wide.

The ORR report states that, "Most refugees are making economic progress and moving toward economic self-sufficiency, but their initial use of public assistance is high." My survey indicates that is especially true among Cambodians in Hawaii.

It is possible to speculate only very generally about why the employment rate of Cambodians in Hawaii is so high.

1) Jobs in the service sector that require minimal training are plentiful.

2) The English level for Cambodians in Hawaii is high. One of the respondents who has recently moved to Hawaii remarked that in Hawaii the general public does not expect everyone to speak

perfect English. My informant was implying that Cambodians in Hawaii might feel less shy to look for a job because of language problems than in other parts of the country.

3) There is pressure from both the service providers and the peer group to work. Several informants told me that one person who didn't work was lazy, a quality they did not admire. In the closely knit Cambodian community the people who have achieved some success will advise and encourage those who are still struggling. Examples of people who have helped others through their advice or example abound.

4) Many of the Cambodians here may have lower expectations than members of other ethnic groups, especially those members of other ethnic groups who worked in white collar jobs in their country of origin. In the refugee camps almost every refugee says, "I'll take any job." For many Cambodians in Hawaii that maxim appears to be true.

5) Out migration has probably taken some Cambodians who did not want to work to the mainland. Most refugee secondary migration from Hawaii is to California, a state with a liberal welfare system.

6) Because most people have been here a relatively long time, (six years), they have had time to find steady employment.

7) Cambodians have shown creativity in self-employing themselves, with 28 percent of their work force self-employed .

8) The tradition of Southeast Asian women working outside the home has encouraged a high percentage of Cambodian women to

seek employment.

I, and many of the Cambodians I interviewed, am optimistic about the future of the Cambodian community in Hawaii.

In the next few years as Cambodians begin to open their own businesses, as they graduate from university, and as ma f those working move up the wage scale I suspect that more affluence will enter the Cambodian lifestyle in Hawaii.

As the people who will speak in the appendix indicate there is a concern that the younger Cambodian generation will grow up and not be as "Cambodian" as the older generation. I however feel that the Cambodians, like the Hawaiians, will retain many of the traits that make Cambodians who they are today.

--End--

Appendix

Than Neou[3]

At 48 Than is almost a generation older than most of the other Cambodian men here with young children, but generation gaps have not yet taken root in the over-20 age group of the Cambodian community, indeed Than's best friends seem to be the younger Cambodian adults. It was in this context that I first met him: he had just moved into public housing and he was having a Sunday lunch with his friends to celebrate; although he claimed that he had invited them over for lunch so that they would learn his new address.

The apartment was on the third and top floor of the building and was, from the outside at least, exactly like the hundreds of other apartments in that large Honolulu housing project. It was luxurious compared to the housing of some other members of the Cambodian community: although the walls were cinder block and the floor concrete the living room stretched across the building so that it had a breeze circulating through it, the kitchen was large, and the three bedrooms comfortable.

[3] Name used by permission.

The living room was flanked by two sofas and equipped with a large color TV and video (things that almost every Cambodian home has), which on that day featured what is standard in many Cambodian households: Chinese kung-fu movies. Lunch that day was the usual Cambodian specialty: fresh green leafy vegetables--lettuce and basil or mint with sprouts and other fresh vegetables plus rice or noodles, a curry soup, and different sauces that tend to be more spicy than hot. The meat as always was cut up into very small pieces, and mixed with the cooked vegetables and in the soup dish.

A few months later, on one of the Cambodian beach picnics, Than told me a little about his life here.

> I don't think that the Cambodians here are successful: we are all on welfare! It's true--all of us except for a few who are immigrants or who are very smart like Hongly. We are all still depending on the government for something--and me too. I live there in the public housing and pay rent according to my income--if I make a little I pay a little rent, if I make a lot of money then I must pay more.
>
> We lived in some other places before this place, but I like it here--before I moved in I heard about the Samoans there, but for me so far there are no

problems.

I have never studied English in this country and I only finished seventh grade in Cambodia. I just learned some English in the camps in Thailand--here if I could speak better I would be able to get a better job.

We came here in August of 1982--I didn't know what to do so I went on welfare for 18 months. After that I got a job in a lumber yard as a worker; now I'm a forklift operator in the same place. It is O.K., everything is O.K., but I heard a lot about California and thought that I would be able to find a better house and job there so last year my family and I went there for eight months: it was just the same. The housing and the jobs were just the same, so we came back here and I got my same job back in the same place and my wife, the same as before, stays at home.

Some people come here and go up step by step, but me my first step was my first and last step. My hope is for my children. I know that in the American way when the children are 18 they are supposed to either go off to university or go live someplace else, but my children can stay with me until they have a job. I will do everything for them until they are ready to find a job.

I think that it is not so important that my

children learn so much about things like Cambodian dance. What is important is that they do well in school, go to college, and have a good future.

Tol Sok[4]

Tol is a 25-year-old Cambodian man who is living temporarily in Hawaii as part of an exchange program between the University of Minnesota and the University of Hawaii. At the time of the interview he had been here for seven months.

I first met him at a Cambodian picnic shortly after his arrival here. He told me that to find the Cambodians in Hawaii he had made enquiries at a local government office--"I won't be lonely anymore," he concluded.

Later I asked him if now that he had lived in a mostly Asian community for a while if his views on Asians in America had changed any. He said that they hadn't, but that in Hawaii he had been surprised at the amount of open affection that goes on between Asians here and the lack of parental respect.

> My family came here six years ago. We were on welfare for the first 18 months. When you first get here you don't realize how different welfare makes you, only later do you see how you are different from the rest, that something is wrong with you, and that you are using different money.

[4] Name used by permission.

Later you feel shy to tell friends that you are on welfare. Most families make good use of welfare for going to school and such, others waste it.

I think that probably some Cambodians might make up excuses to keep from working.

Here though I think that most Cambodians are working: there are plenty of jobs and here no one expects your English to be perfect, so even if your English is not so good you can get a job.

The Cambodians here are more unified than in Minnesota. Here there are so few. In Minneapolis there are about 15,000 Cambodians. For the New Year's celebration we rented a high school gymnasium but still there wasn't room inside to move around and that was just a fraction of the Cambodians in Minneapolis. Here with a smaller group it is easier to get to know people. Maybe that is why here the Cambodians seem friendlier than in Minnesota.

In a bigger place people can divide themselves up in different ways. For example, if you have a group of a thousand people and 100 of them are higher class people they will associate most of the time only with themselves, but if you have a small group of a hundred people that same 10 percent of high class people will associate with everyone. Here there is a lot of cross-

social contact--ten in 100. And here people aren't politically divided. In Minnesota the Cambodians have divided up into 2 or 3 groups like the Sihanouk group, the KPNLF or "Son Sann" group, or the neutral group and the different groups don't associate with each other so much.

Religion isn't as important a factor as politics to Cambodians now, especially with the young people who don't care much about the religion.

Socially Cambodians can form deep friendships with Americans, but still I think that Cambodians need each other for psychological support and in some ways it is easier for friendships to develop among fellow Cambodians. If you are in a foreign country you will seek people like yourself as well. Now I am thinking of all of the good Cambodian food that will be at the New Year's celebration.

I am going to university because my parents pushed me, even though they are uneducated themselves. I think that they encouraged me so much because I had an uncle who was educated in Cambodia and my parents saw that education made his life better off than theirs. But, yes, it is true that usually uneducated parents don't push their children so hard.

When I am older I hope to be able to support my

parents--I feel a sense of gratitude.

Seang M.Seng[5]

Seang invited me over to his apartment on Kapiolani Boulevard on a Saturday morning--one of the few free spots in his busy week as a medical student. His wife was at work and his two children played in the house as we talked.

His apartment, considering the presence of two small children, was unusually neat--framed pictures of his family dotted the walls, a painting of the Buddha was high in one corner, the television and stereo were draped with table cloths. One bookcase was filled with medical books. The two-room apartment's furniture consisted of a kitchen table and two low beach chairs. In the bedroom the mattress that the children sleep on were piled on the bed. The apartment seemed spacious--a desired effect as Seang had turned down offers for more elaborate furniture.

At 36, Seang, like so many Cambodians, has had some sad and horrid experiences. The only survivor of an extended family of 24, he said that he doesn't think much about the past, but he did relate this incident: During the famine in the Pol Pot regime he was in a hospital when one night he heard a commotion and some arguing. Getting up to see what was going on he saw that the dispute concerned the body of a man who had just died. Seang

[5] Name used by permission.

moved closer--the body was still warm to the touch--the man had been cut open at the stomach. Seang then realized that the people had been arguing about the distribution of the man's cooked internal organs.

Seang told me that his wife will still sometimes wake him up at night when she is thinking about her homeland.

> Even before I got here in August of 1980 I had applied to enter an intensive pre-med program here in Hawaii, but I had been rejected because I was not living in Hawaii. Even though before 1975 I had finished five of the seven-year medical program in Cambodia I had thought that because of the language barrier I wouldn't get in.
>
> For my first 18 months here I took welfare and during that time I went to school full-time--I took the chance that the investment in education would be worthwhile. First I went to adult education classes at Kaimuki High School where I passed the G.E.D. [the equivalent of a high school diploma]. After that I went to Kapiolani Community College for two semesters and then finally I was accepted into the intensive pre-med program at the University of Hawaii.
>
> I was the first Cambodian refugee at the University of Hawaii so I was scared, but I did everything that I had to do anyway. I remember the

first time that I had to make a report on a subject in front of the other students I was really nervous and not confident, but later it came easier. Even now though sometimes when my classmates are joking among themselves I still don't see what is so funny. So language is still a problem and I think that if it wasn't for the language problem I would have done better.

After I got into the pre-med program I had to study almost all of the time seven days a week and in the meantime my wife was working in a bakery as a cake decorator. For the first few years of medical school because of my busy schedule my time with my family became very limited so my wife and I started to have some problems, even though she was very understanding and could see what my dream was. After that I had to try to spend more time with her and my children, but even now if a day goes by without my opening a book I feel guilty.

With my wife working and a tuition waiver to go to school I still didn't have enough money so I had to take a loan.

In some ways I'm glad that I've had to do it this way--I've learned the American medical system.

After I graduate from here I'll go to California and do my residency there to be a "family practice"

doctor. Right now I plan to work on the mainland near a Cambodian population center so I can serve my people better. I'd like to do research into the medical problems that Cambodians in the U.S. have. For example, here I think that not many of the Cambodian women go in for regular breast exams or for PAP tests for cultural reasons, so the Cambodians in a large area might have special problems that I'd like to look into.

Here I think that on the whole Cambodians are successful. One real success story is my neighbor, David. His English was pretty limited, but still he had the courage to try driving a taxi and now he owns his own car and makes a good living at it.

I see some of our young people drifting away--they see the TV, the movies, the dancing and grow up in that kind of atmosphere. Don't misunderstand me--there is nothing wrong with modern dancing or anything else, but it has to be done with a Cambodian attitude, you see?

Even now when I talk to my older child in Cambodian he will answer me in English. So I have given my children Cambodian names because I know that even though I teach them Cambodian and Cambodian customs, they will grow up American and when they are adults the only thing that they might have left is

their Cambodian names.

Hongly Khuy[6]

I first met Hongly in 1981 in the Philippines Refugee Processing Center, where I was working as a United Nations Volunteer. He had been guaranteed resettlement in the United States and was working in the U.S. government's refugee education program. He was very popular there--with his fluent English, sophisticated ways, and eager and helpful nature, he was in demand from both the American and Cambodian community as a cultural go-between. The Americans used him as a translator in their "American cultural orientation" classes and the Cambodians used him as a translator and English teacher.

He was without other family in the camp and had just recently converted to Christianity, two things which were not unusual. Even though his sponsor was going to be a Christian religious organization Hongly's motives for conversion, it seemed to me, were sincere, unlike many of the "rice" Christians who convert in the hopes that it will hasten their resettlement. He still frequently goes to church.

In Hawaii he has remained in demand by the Cambodian community. For the last two years he has been the first and only Cambodian consultant for the federally-funded Mutual Assistance Association Center. In that job he helps people find housing,

[6] Name used by permission.

fill out their tax forms, apply for loans, and generally adjust to life in the U.S. Being a full-time student he has contemplated quitting his job at MAAC, but hasn't, knowing that even if he quit many members of the Cambodian community would still turn to him for help and he would not be able to say no.

Outside of his job with MAAC Hongly helps organize the very popular Cambodian picnics and occasionally will help lobby support for those Cambodians who are stuck on the Cambodian/Thai border, or for the people of Cambodia.

He has lived in a two-bedroom apartment on Kapiolani Boulevard for most of his 7 years in Hawaii. The apartment, on one level at least, looks like the dorm room of a college freshman. Pictures, memos, cards, computer print-outs, and technical vocabulary written on yellow Scotch pads virtually plaster the walls in an uneven collage of a Cambodian student's life in the U.S. The three rooms are crowded with an assortment of modern toys that appeal to engineering students--different tape players, with cassette-tape boxes spread everywhere, speakers hidden under the furniture, a video camera mounted on a tripod that is sometimes used as a coat hanger, a huge color television and its accompanying video with video cassette boxes scattered around it, two telephones, one of which functions, calculators, and the computer. The shelves and closets are filled with boxes, papers, other electronic gadgets, and books piled unevenly everywhere.

Hongly's wife, Sovechanna, accepts the environs of a mad

scientist and still finds room to cook Cambodian food and a space on the couch from which to watch adventure shows on television.

Hongly, like so many Cambodians, still thinks a great deal about his homeland--on one wall of his apartment is a drawing he made from memory of the yard that he grew up in. An early victim of the international chess game that was played on the Thai-Cambodian border after the Vietnamese invaded Cambodia in 1979--he still sometimes wakes up in the mornings thinking about the times he was caught in the cross-fire of opposing armies on the border, or he will wake up thinking of some horrible incident that he witnessed in Cambodia, some of which involved members of his own family. He told me that once he was having dinner in a communal dining room in the Khmer Rouge regime when a woman who had been a frequent complainer started to gripe about the sorry state of the meal. Two Khmer Rouge cadres grabbed her and kicked her hard in the stomach and face until she lay unconscious on the floor. Then one of them, to the horror of everyone watching, cut out her liver, cooked it, and ate it in front of everyone.

Most of this interview took place in the main room of Hongly's apartment.

> When I left Thailand I went straight to the Big Island where I stayed at the Youth With a Mission base. I took part in their 6-month discipleship training school. The first three

months took place there and the second three months were for missionary work. When the lecture part was over I said that I wanted to do missionary work here in Honolulu.

My team and I stayed in the YMCA near the Statehouse downtown. In the evenings we would take the gospel to the drunks and prostitutes of the Hotel Street area. I liked it, but when the course was over I said that I wanted to go to school here. My sponsor asked me why I didn't want to go back to the religious school--I told him that here more courses would be offered; he was very understanding.

From downtown I moved in with Dr. Daniel Susott, whom I had met in Thailand, and the state gave me some money to go to school. I went on welfare and stayed on it for a year which allowed me to go to school full-time. Welfare, at least for me, made education possible. Some people though I think get on welfare and don't go after an education because they have never tasted education before.

In June of 1982, after I had been in the U.S. for one year, I flew to Oklahoma and married a woman I had met in Thailand, Sovechanna. When we came back we moved into this apartment.

My wife had first gone to California where she was on welfare for one year, after that she and her family moved to Oklahoma where she mopped floors and worked in a fast food restaurant.

Here she got a job taking care of an old lady for a while and then worked as a bakery worker and as a waitress in a Thai restaurant. For most of this time she went to school too at Kapiolani Community College; she graduated in May of 1985 with a certificate of achievement in Clerical Sciences.

After that we learned about a job at the Community Services office. She was hesitant to go in for the interview, but I encouraged her--she did well and got the job. Now she is the secretary in the program that coordinates the federally funded refugee programs in the State of Hawaii and she has a second full-time job as a waitress in a drive-in restaurant.

I stopped taking welfare in 1983. I was glad to no longer apply for welfare--I didn't like going down to the welfare office to apply. Sometimes you know they will ask you if you've looked for a job or if you've received any money. They can force you to apply for a job that you don't want. Most Cambodians feel the same way--they think that

welfare helps them, but they don't like going to see the welfare worker. Most Cambodians here aren't on welfare.

My first job was as a phone solicitor for the Hawaii Fire fighters Association at $3.50 an hour. After that I worked for Kapiolani Community College as a distribution clerk. In school I studied something about computers so after that I was able to get a job at City Bank where I operated bank computers. I did that for two years, going to school part-time.

Then in the spring of 1987 I decided to go to school full-time. Because I'm married and my wife works I don't get any help from the government for my education, but I work part-time as a computer lab assistant and I spend a few hours a week as the consultant at the local MAAC where I help Cambodians with different resettlement problems, so we get by.

Sometimes I feel bad because I'm 33 and still in school. Now I'm in my forth semester of study at the University of Hawaii. When I have a B.S. in engineering I should be able to get a good job, then I think that I'll get a nice apartment or a house in the country.

I think that most Cambodians here are

successful. Sure some are on welfare and Cambodians are no different from anyone else when it comes to accepting money from the government or keeping what money they have by not paying taxes on it, but still almost all Cambodians here work and many of us see our lives are getting better.

The welfare system makes people do strange things. Some people will refuse a raise because if they get it they will loose their medical insurance or food stamps and thus have to spend even more of their money to buy their own. Other people stay un-legally-married, even though to us they are married, so that they can continue to get money for school or AFDC. I know that it is much worse in California than it is here though--California is spoiling the Cambodians, the Laotians, and the Vietnamese who live there.

Here all of the Cambodians know each other and we get together as often as we can, still I see that some of our young people are drifting away from the community and I worry about it. I try to think of what we can do to keep them in our community--we are a small community, but still sometime we should be able to have dances with music that the young people enjoy so that they can have fun and still be part of our community.

Sarin and Phkateap Song[7]

Phkateap is Hongly's sister so I have known her and her husband, Sarin, socially for years. They are both in their mid-thirties. My first memory of her three years ago still describes her life today: it was in the main room of her apartment--the television was blaring, her two young children were rampaging around the room, and she was sitting at her industrial sewing machine calmly and diligently working to finish a large order of "Aloha" shirts for a department store and still patiently explaining something to me. I thought that with her concentration if the circumstances were a little different she would have a good future as a jet fighter pilot.

Her husband, Sarin, works in a bakery and frequently he will take batches of rolls or bread that for some reason haven't risen properly and distribute them among the Cambodian community (and even to me).

I interviewed both of them in their first-floor, one-bedroom apartment's kitchen/living room that is just a few feet away from Kapiolani Boulevard. The kitchen/living room is crowded with the facts of their existence--a giant color TV that they have cable TV for, two industrial sewing

[7] Name used by permission.

machines, one of which cost nearly $2,000, a kitchen table and chairs, a bicycle for their 4 and 8-year-old sons, other toys, and boxes of cut-but-not-sewn-material.

On a make-shift bulletin board are articles, notices, and pictures. The pictures are of Teap's father's grave and Sarin's family's farm in Cambodia. In one of the pictures Buddhist monks are sitting in front of the Chinese-style grave of Teap's father, who starved to death during the Pol Pot (Khmer Rouge) regime.

Sarin and Phkateap, who is known as Teap, sat at the kitchen table collaborating and expanding each other's answers to my questions as we talked.

Sarin: My first sponsor was in Texas, but I told them that I didn't want to go there because my brother-in-law was here in Hawaii, so I got them to change the things and send us here. We got here on February 23, 1982.

When we got here I thought that we would only be here temporarily--I wanted to go back home when we got peace. Now if peace came I would still want to go back--it is my country where I was born, but only if I can take a lot more money than I have now with us. Cambodia is a very poor country.

Teap: He wants to go back because his mother and

grandmother are still there--he still misses them. I don't want to go back--just to visit, O.K., but I don't want to live there. I don't have good memories.

Sarin: When I got here it was very difficult because my English was very bad--I could understand a little, but I could not speak. But after two months I started working in the bakery as a dishwasher and at nights I worked in the restaurant and cutting the grass. I worked too much to support my family--no welfare.

Teap: I didn't speak any English either. While he was working I stayed home and took care of my children--lazy. To learn English I had an American man come here one time a week and then I talked to my children in English, but still my English is not good.

Sometimes I go to church to the Bible study, but while they are talking I cannot understand so I sit there and daydream. I have a dream of going to school to learn more English and then getting a job outside the home.

Sarin: We still have a hard time with English.

When we have to fill out the form for taxes or something we have to go to Hongly for help--we can't understand it.

Teap: Even the show on T.V. I cannot understand a lot of the time and when I go to the doctor I can't explain what is wrong--I have to use my hands to explain.

Sarin: I worked in the bakery as a dishwasher for a while and then I became a baker. Now I can bake all of the things in the bakery, but I work 8, 10, or even more than 12 hours a day. Then a few months ago I became a supervisor and now I have so much to worry about.

But it is a great job. I didn't have a plan, a real dream when I came here, but sure now I'm successful. We're saving money now and hope to move to a nicer apartment soon.

I think that most of the Cambodians here are successful, but some still get welfare because they have too many children.

Teap: From 1982 until 1984 I didn't do anything but take care of my children. [She gave birth to her second son, Paul, in 1984.] Then an American

friend helped find me a job sewing at home and one of Sarin's friends from church helped me buy a sewing machine.

I've worked for many companies and they are all the same--I think that working at home is harder than working in the factory. In the factory you only work 8 hours a day, but here, because I get paid by the piece I work 10, 12, or 16 hours a day sewing and I cook the food and take care of the children. The boss who gives me the cloth to sew always wants me to rush.

Sarin: I wanted her to work at home to save time for taking care of the children and cook the food, but if I can get a job where I work only 8 hours a day and I can be home at night to take care of the children I want her to go to school to improve her English.

Teap: Sewing all of the time like this is boring. I want to work outside. I have an idea to become a cake decorator to work in the bakery that he might open up someday.

--END--

The questionnaire that was used for the basis of the interviews:

WHY DO CAMBODIANS IN HAWAII DO SO WELL? a simple survey
by
Tom Riddle, with grateful assistance of
Hong Ly Khuy, and Dr. Goeff Hayes

All answers are confidential--we're asking for your name just to make sure that we don't question you twice.

1. When did you arrive in the U.S.A ?_____ 2 Did you come straight here from the camps?Y/N IF not, what state did you go to first?_____ For how long _____? Why did you choose to come to Hawaii? Family? Climate? Marriage? Other _____
4. Are you a U.S. citizen? Yes/no?
5. How many people live in your house?_____. Are they all family members?____ Who are the people who aren't family members?

_____ _____

Is everyone in your house a refugee? Y/N.

6. Are you the head of your house? Y/N . 7. If you aren't, what relationship are you to the head of the house? Wife, son, etc.

_____.

8. EDUCATION in CAMBODIA
none_____ elementary school____ high school____, years____, university_____, years____ other_____years____.

9. EDUCATION in the U S. (*For example ESL class 2 years, Secretarial school one year, currently in night school*)

_____

_____.

10. Do you think that your English is good_____,fair_____, poor___ ? 11. Filling our forms is (circle) no problem hard
11. Do you write letters etc. in English? Y\N. 12. Do you feel that your English ability holds you back? Y\N
13. What was your usual occupation in Cambodia before 1975?____

_____.

14. What do you do now in Hawaii?_____

_____. Is this full-time?_____ If not, how many hours a week do you work?___ 15. When did you begin?_____ 16. What other jobs have you had in

Hawaii?_____

_____.

17. Do any of the other people in your house work? What do they do?_____

_____

18. Have you ever taken Welfare? Y/N . If yes, what kind and how long did you take it? cash assistance for _____
Food stamps for _____, medicaid for _____, AFDC for _____
19. Do you regularly read an English newspaper or watch the TV news? Y/N.
20. Name?_____ _____ 21. Age___. Sex ___ I am (circle one): single, married, divorced, widow, widower.
22. About how many times a year do you get together with other Cambodians who aren't your relatives at parties, picnics, etc __
23. Why do you think that Cambodians in HI are so successful?

_____(continue on back).

Thank you * O kun * Thank you * O kun *Thank you * O kun * Thank you * O kun *Thank you * O kun * Thank you * O kun

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