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ADAPTATION OF CAMBODIANS IN NEW ZEALAND ACHIEVEMENT, CULTURAL IDENTITY AND COMMUNITY DEVELOPMENT

Man Hau Liev
ADAPTATION OF CAMBODIANS IN NEW ZEALAND
ACHIEVEMENT, CULTURAL IDENTITY AND
COMMUNITY DEVELOPMENT

A thesis presented in fulfilment of the requirement for the degree of
Doctor of Philosophy in Development Studies
at the University of Auckland

Man Hau Liev

2008

Centre for Development Studies
University of Auckland
Abstract

This thesis has two foci: how Cambodians with a refugee background manage their new life in Aotearoa/New Zealand, and how an identity as a Khmer Kiwi transnational community has developed.

Analytic concepts — such as forced migration, cultural bereavement, adaptation, integration, diaspora, transnationalism, identification, and community of practice — are used to trace the trajectory of the contemporary way of life of Cambodians, their community development, and their cultural identity. The data gathered from mixed-method research reveal the various opinions, strategies, coping mechanisms, and paths that Cambodian participants have adopted in order to adapt to life in New Zealand and still maintain their Khmer heritage. The majority of participants were proud of their personal achievements, and now have found normalcy in their new life.

Individual struggles to engage and integrate with multicultural New Zealand society have required negotiation and protection of group interests, and inevitably some of these have resulted in conflicts and fragmentation within the Khmer community. Religious practice, organisation, and leadership became the main driving forces for asserting Khmer community identity. Collective memory was harnessed to deal with shared cultural bereavement, and the quest for belonging lent momentum to the community’s development and management of its identity. Khmer Theravada Buddhism has emerged as a means by which the majority of Cambodians can achieve their spiritual wellbeing, and has become a platform for various community identity developments within the New Zealand social and legal contexts. Gender roles and structures are a significant part of community development and of my analysis.

This development of Khmer identity in New Zealand is a new strand of Khmer identity: Khmer heritage, transnational experience, and ‘Kiwi-ism’. Such transformation of identity reflects geo-political influences on integration in the form of belonging to and identifying with two or more groups. For example, the majority of participants proudly identified themselves as Khmer Kiwis. Their transnational lives have been enriched by their country of origin (Cambodia) and their country of residence (Aotearoa/New Zealand).

Key words:
Cambodian refugees, forced migration, adaptation, integration, transnationalism, Buddhism, Khmer identity, community development, and community of practice.
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This study is dedicated to those Cambodians with a refugee background who have made the effort to build themselves a new life in Aotearoa/New Zealand. Above all, I wish to acknowledge with gratitude the support of all participants, and others who have provided information, for it was their willingness to share valuable inside information and to take the time to do so that has made this participatory study possible. I am deeply indebted to friends, colleagues, and all of those individuals and organisations who have assisted and supported me during the course of this study. To the Khmer Sangha in New Zealand, especially Reverend Suthep Surapong the head of the Khmer Buddhist Order and its members, for their assistance and guidance on Khmer Buddhism and its practice. To the Auckland Khmer Buddhist Association and the Khmer Foundation for access to their archive. To the Centre for Refugee Education at AUT University for their time and support for this work. To the University of Auckland — especially the Department of Anthropology and the Centre for Development Studies — for the Graduate Research Fund, for support, and editing assistance given for the preparation of this work. I am grateful to Mrs Hillary van Uden, Ms Kate Stone, and Ms Jessica MacCormick for their meticulous editing work.

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On a personal note, special thanks to my wife, Monthy, for her love, patience, care, support, and encouragement. Special thanks also to my sponsor Mr Mey Cheoung and to my family — especially my parents, my sisters Loeng and Lam, my brother Rithy, my cousins and their families — for their love, understanding, care and support.
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<th>Abbreviation</th>
<th>Full Form</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>ASEAN</td>
<td>Association of Southeast Asian Nations</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>BLDP</td>
<td>Buddhist Liberal Democratic Party</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>CGDK</td>
<td>Coalition Government of Democratic Kampuchea</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>CPP</td>
<td>Cambodian People's Party</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>ECRE</td>
<td>European Council on Refugees and Exiles</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>FUNCINPEC</td>
<td><em>Front Uni National pour un Cambodge Indépendent, Neutre, Pacifique et Coopératif</em></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>ICCI</td>
<td>Inter-Church Commission on Immigration and Refugee Resettlement</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>(the present-day Refugee and Migrant Service — RMS)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>IRC</td>
<td>International Rescues Committees</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>KPNLF</td>
<td>Kampuchean People’s National Liberation Front</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>LRCRCS</td>
<td>League of the Red Cross and Red Crescent Societies</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>NGOs</td>
<td>Non-governmental organisations</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>NZIS</td>
<td>New Zealand Immigration Service</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>PRK</td>
<td>People’s Republic of Kampuchea</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>RMS</td>
<td>Refugee and Migrant Service (previously known as ICCI)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>SOC</td>
<td>State of Cambodia</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>UNBRO</td>
<td>United Nations Border Relief Operation</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>UNDP</td>
<td>United Nations Development Programme</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>UNHCR</td>
<td>United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>UNTAC</td>
<td>United Nations Transitional Authority in Cambodia</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>USA</td>
<td>United States of America</td>
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### Glossary of Khmer Words

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Khmer Word</th>
<th>English Translation</th>
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<tr>
<td>Achar</td>
<td>Khmer elder administrator of ceremony; ritualist.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ajakh</td>
<td>Daily Buddhist monk’s prayer.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Anusangha Vacchāra</td>
<td>An annual national meeting of the monks.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Barb</td>
<td>Bad merit.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Boun</td>
<td>Good merit or punya.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Brahma</td>
<td>One of the principal gods of the Brahmanic trinity, the “creator”; generally represented with four faces and four arms, mounted on the Hamsa or sacred goose. Symbols associated with him include: disc, ladle, book, rosary, vase, flywhisk and sceptre.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Bodhi Tree</td>
<td>A papal tree or Ficus religiosa. The tree under which the Buddha achieved Enlightenment.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Buddha</td>
<td>Founder of Buddhism; a north Indian philosopher, Gautama Siddhartha, who attained enlightenment and discovered the law of reciprocal origination of causes and effects, the Four Noble Truths and the Eightfold Path which lead to the end of transmigration — Samsara and suffering.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Buddhism</td>
<td>Asian religion based on the teachings of Buddha.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Cambodia</td>
<td>English name of Kampuchea (Kambuja).</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Cambodian</td>
<td>People of Cambodia — ប្រជាជាតិ កម្ពុជា ព្រះរាជាណាចក្របរទេស</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Chedi</td>
<td>A stupa or Buddhist monument of a funeral or commemorative nature, often containing relics or cremated remains.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Four Noble Truths</td>
<td>The doctrine expounded (after the Middle Way) in Buddha’s first sermon, viz. (1) life is suffering — អុីស (2) suffering has a cause; (3) suffering can be eliminated; (4) there is a path for elimination.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Five Precepts</td>
<td>Pancha Sila — ប្រែពុត្ត — are the five basic Buddhist rules to refrain from (1) destroying living creatures, (2) taking that which is not given, (3) sexual misconduct, (4) incorrect speech, and (5) intoxicating drinks and drugs.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Karma Actions with moral intention;  
good karma leads to good merit or boun បុណ្តិ  
Kampong Pier, port, or village on the bank of a waterway.  
Kampuchea Formal name of Cambodia.  
Khmer Cambodians who are descendant of the indigenous people living in ancient Kampuchea and present Cambodia, or language of the Khmer.  
Khmer Krom Khmer indigenous living in Vietnam.  
Nain Samaneir or Buddhist novice.  
Nikaya Sect of Sangha, a body of monks sharing an ordination tradition, and in agreement on matters of discipline. There are two nikaya in Cambodia. Dhamayuttika-Nikaya ដំណាក់ជាតិកាល is based on a strict interpretation of the rule of conduct (Vineya or discipline) and the various roles of the monk. This school places great emphasis on education and meditation in the quest for Nirvana and less on pastoral and parish activities than does the school of Moha-Nikaya ដ្ឝាយជាតិកាល.  
Ramayana Famous Hindu epic (Khmer: ‘Reamker’); portraying Rama’s struggle to find his consort, Sita — who has been captured by the demon Ravana — with the support of the monkey King Hanuman. Scenes from this magnificent tale have been widely used in the ornamentation of temples throughout Southeast Asia.  
Ramvong Khmer dance performed in a circle where couples follow one another.  
Panhia Intelligence and knowledge.  
Phchium Ben A commemoration of the spirit of ancestors, this is one of the main festivities of the Khmer calendar around the last crescent of September or October. The festival lasts 15 days, each of which is called a day of Kan Ben ភ្លេង។ A Ben is an offering. The word ‘Ben’ is derived from Sanskrit pinda, or balls of rice to be offered to the souls of the dead. On the last morning of Phchium
Ben, the majority of Cambodians go to the temple to offer the food for the spirit of their ancestors.

Phiku

Buddhist monk.

Popil

A burning candle with melted wax on an upside-down heart-shaped handle as a symbol of the union of God Shiva and his consort Uma: the candle represents linga of Shiva (or male), and the upside-down heart-shaped handle represents yoni of Uma (Shiva’s wife or female).

Salar Chun

A hall for Buddhists offering food to the monks.

Samadhi

Meditation and focus.

Sampot

Fabric panel worn round the lower half of the body.

Sangha

Buddhist monks or their community.

Sila

Virtue or a precept.

Simar

A boundary.

Stupa

A Buddhist monument of a funeral or commemorative nature, often containing relics or cremated remains.

Theravada Buddhism

An orthodox branch of Buddhism, also called “small vehicle” school, that spreads southwards from Nepal across to South Asia and Southeast Asia.

Tontine

A rotating saving and credit association (ROSCA) or an informal financial network of 12 to 24 members who contribute equal share of money to a pool and take turns to access the money pool for their needs through bidding.

Tripitaka

Buddhist canon, composed of: (1) Sutra Pitaka — the monastic discipline; (2) Vinaya Pitaka — discourse; and (3) Abhidhamma Pitaka — doctrinal analyses.

Vihara

A ceremonial building which hosts the statue of Buddha.

Wat

A Khmer Buddhist temple.
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