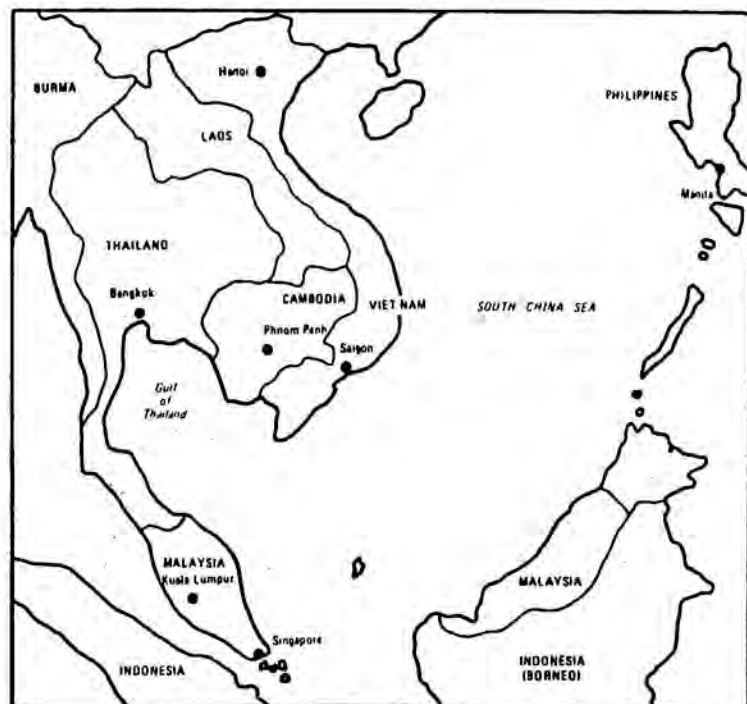


THE SOUTHEAST ASIANS IN RHODE ISLAND

The New Americans

By
LOUISE LIND



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Rhode Island Ethnic Heritage Pamphlet Series

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Rhode Island Ethnic Heritage Pamphlet Series
Dr. Patrick T. Conley, *General Editor*

EDITOR'S FOREWORD

In 1975 and 1976, on the eve of the bicentennial observance, in my capacity as chairman of Rhode Island's celebration (ri76), I established eighteen ethnic heritage committees, consisting of recognized leaders of this state's major ethnocultural groups. One purpose of this move was to involve in bicentennial activities those ethnic communities whose contact with this country did not extend as far back as the Revolutionary era. I urged such groups to observe and commemorate the contributions they had made to the American and Rhode Island experience from the time of their arrival down to the bicentennial year. A much more important reason for establishing the ethnic heritage program, however, was to allow each group to present its unique contributions, customs, and folkways to its neighbors from other cultural backgrounds. Formulated under the premise that knowledge promotes understanding and understanding begets brotherhood, the program was designed to break down the ethnocentric barriers and antagonisms that hindered us from achieving that lofty motto and goal—*E pluribus unum*, one out of many.

The one task assigned to each group upon its formation was to write a brief interpretive account of its Rhode Island experience—its motives for migration, areas of settlement, cultural survivals, and economic, political, and social activities—together with an assessment of its contribution to the development of our state. Though some efforts are more sociological, subjective, anecdotal, or selective than the neat, precise historical narrative that I envisioned, each of these pamphlets in its own way makes a valuable statement to all Rhode Islanders and provides a useful self-evaluation for the group that is the subject of analysis.

After the bicentennial's expiration, the concept of an ethnic heritage pamphlet series was kept alive by the Rhode Island Heritage Commission and its tireless chairman, Robert J. McKenna. Albert T. Klyberg of the Rhode Island Historical Society, Dr. Hilliard Beller of the Rhode Island Publications Society, and, especially, the authors of the various essays have also labored to bring this project to fruition as their contribution to the 350th anniversary of the founding of the state. No historical enterprise could be more appropriate for this 1986 celebration than a recounting of the toil and the triumph of our diverse peoples: From American Indians to Southeast Asians, we are Rhode Islanders all!

Patrick T. Conley

Exodus and Immigration

In the spring of 1975 the United States armed forces withdrew from South Vietnam, leaving its capital, Saigon, to fall into Communist hands. Within a few days at least 100,000 Vietnamese people were evacuated in U.S. Navy and South Vietnamese ships to the island of Guam. American planes then carried them to hastily set-up refugee camps in former army bases in California, Florida, and Pennsylvania. The U.S. State Department thereupon asked the American people to sponsor these families, who had been so quickly wrenched from their homes. Within a few months all the U.S. refugee camps were emptied.

Meanwhile, however, the Communist takeover in South Vietnam had immediate repercussions in neighboring Laos and Cambodia. Hmong tribesmen who had been sympathetic to the Americans decided they had better make their way down the jungle-covered mountains of Laos, where they and their ancestors had lived for centuries, to the Mekong River and across that to the seeming safety of Thailand. The capital of Laos, Vientiane, was taken over by Laotian Communists in a bloodless coup eight months after the fall of Saigon. Ethnic Lao from the cities and lowlands then joined the Hmong exodus.

To the south, in Cambodia, Pol Pot, leader of a Communist faction called the Khmer Rouge, gained control of his country that same year and began a violent and senseless experiment in social engineering that all but devastated his country. The December 1985 *Issue Paper* of the U.S. Committee for Refugees relates the tragic tale:

The Khmer Rouge evacuated the country's urban centers, including Phnom Penh [the capital], dispersing the people to virtual slave labor camps devoted to agriculture. All signs of the earlier society were systematically destroyed,

and human interaction depersonalized. Temples were demolished, the monks either killed or forced to join work gangs. Family life was banned, with parents, children, and spouses sent to different work sites around the country. . . . Many were punished or killed for the most innocent signs of superior education, wealth or sophistication. Even wearing glasses or speaking a foreign language became dangerous.

But Pol Pot had his enemies too—the Vietnamese Communists. Angered by his apparent desire to ally with the People's Republic of China, the Vietnamese Communists invaded Cambodia, and the world then saw Red soldiers fighting Red soldiers. In 1979 Pol Pot was forced to retreat to the jungles to wage guerilla warfare.

In 1975 the population of Cambodia was eight million. By 1986, after five years of starvation, disease, and war under the Khmer Rouge, plus added years of continuous fighting between Vietnamese and Cambodian Communists, the population of Cambodia had fallen to an estimated three or four million people.

Meanwhile, in all three countries—Laos, Cambodia, and Vietnam—the Communists were throwing former government workers, members of the armed forces, police, and all who had ever worked with United States agencies into so-called reeducation camps. Prisoners were assigned to camps far from their families, where they were underfed and forced to endure hard labor, and often they were punished by being put in shackles or in solitary confinement. Their families, left without support, had no means of communicating with them. Their children were discriminated against in schools. If and when the prisoners were released, they themselves were doomed to lives of grinding privation. As a result, the sad saga of the "boat people" began in Vietnam.

This flight of the Vietnamese was described by the administrative committee of the National Conference of Catholic Bishops in the United States as "an almost suicidal endeavor in search of asylum." According to firsthand reports cited in the bishops' February 1978 *Statement on Small Boat Refugees in Southeast Asia*, an estimated 50 percent of those fleeing in small boats lost their lives in the attempt. The statement continues:

Among the tragic aspects of this refugee movement is the reluctance of larger vessels plying the South China Sea to pick up those in distress in small boats. . . . To do so can involve them and their shipping companies in many complications. Some countries, learning that refugees are aboard a vessel, will not permit even the crew to disembark. . . .

It is an appalling fact that, after braving the terrors of the sea, refugees find that what awaits them is not really asylum. A proliferation of reports

indicates that their boats are often driven offshore or towed back to the open sea. . . .

In desperation, some are forced to set sail in their small, unseaworthy craft for Australia, over 3,000 miles away.

Rhode Island's New Immigrants

Here in Rhode Island, halfway around the world, this brutal history has intimately affected the state and its people. In the aftermath of these events, many of the boat people and other refugees who were pitied when seen on TV or in newspaper photographs are now living down the street from or working with the erstwhile viewers.

As a result of this influx, by 1987 there were some twelve thousand new Rhode Islanders whose lives had been affected by recent war experiences. Many had lost members of their immediate families through starvation, disease, imprisonment, torture, murder, or drowning at sea. Though now free, these refugees were haunted by the knowledge that their spouses, children, parents, or friends were still suffering back home or in refugee camps in Thailand, Malaysia, Hong Kong, or the Philippines. Having so tragically experienced man's inhumanity to man, these new Rhode Islanders appreciated freedom as had few other Rhode Islanders before them.

Exiles seeking refuge in Rhode Island had been arriving for 339 years before Southeast Asians joined their ranks in appreciable numbers. Quite suddenly the state became home as well to twelve thousand Hmong, Laotian, Cambodian, and Vietnamese people.

Who are these new Americans?

They are the Vietnamese Army officer who worked side by side with United States Army officers to try to keep his homeland a democratic nation . . . the Hmong mountaineer who fought to stave off the Communist infiltration of Laos . . . the Laotian warehouse supervisor who worked directly with the Americans . . . the Cambodian rice farmer who fled his home because his nation was in the throes of a Communist-directed genocide never before equaled in history. They are the wives and mothers and fathers and brothers and sisters of these men, and they are their children as well.

Most came to Rhode Island since 1980; almost none were here prior to 1975. The Vietnamese were the first to arrive, having fled when the Communists of North Vietnam took control of their country in April 1975. A few months later, Laos fell under the Red sickle, then Cambodia. "These people are here as a direct result of United



Hien Thi Dao and her three daughters—Ngoc, Linh, and Son—at a refugee camp at Indiantown Gap, Pennsylvania, shortly after their arrival from Vietnam in 1975. Ngoc has since graduated from the University of Rhode Island.



A Lao-tian Khmer English class at a refugee camp in Thailand. The Thai teacher, Aood Sitthiraksa (front row, second from right), visited Woonsocket in 1984 to see how some of her former students were faring.

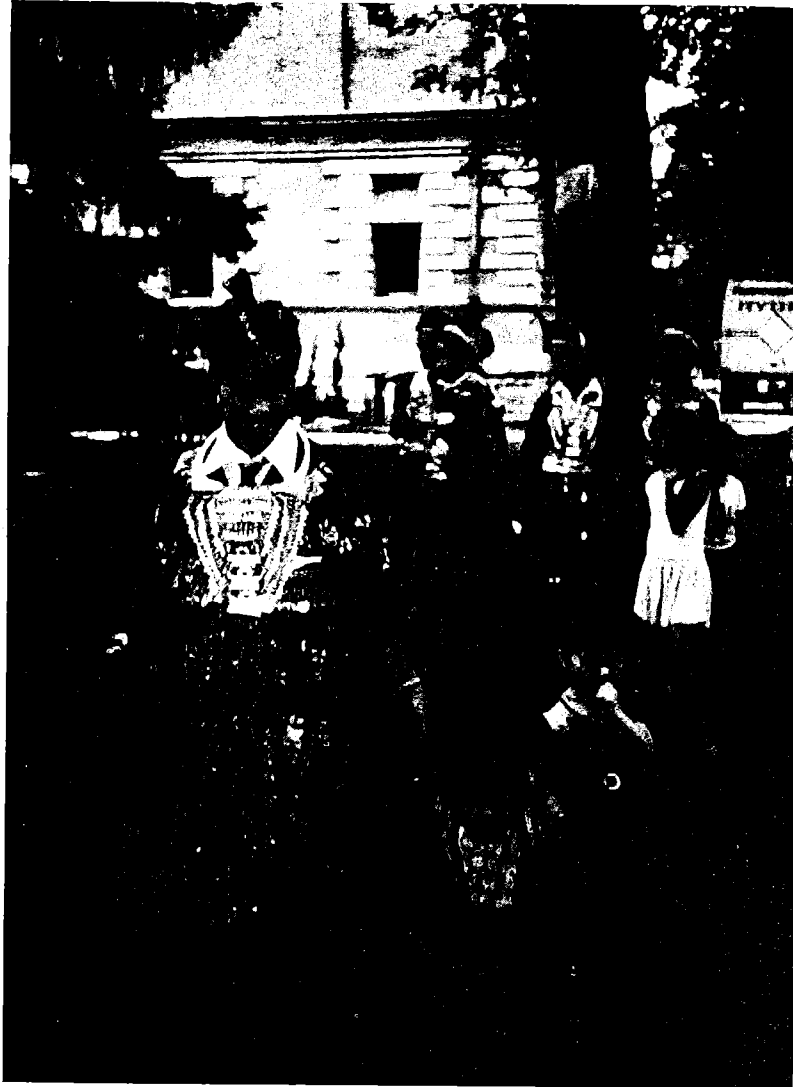
States foreign policy,” points out Paul H. McLaughlin, former coordinator of the Rhode Island Office of Refugee Resettlement.

They came here because some person, church, or group felt morally obliged to send word to an international voluntary agency working with the U.S. State Department, expressing a willingness to sponsor them. That invitation was what released these new Rhode Islanders from the refugee camps of Thailand, Malaysia, Hong Kong, and other countries, where they had sought first asylum. Some refugees had to wait three years or more in these camps. Some are still waiting.

The major international voluntary agencies (called VOLAGS) that invited refugees to Rhode Island are the International Institute, which is the local branch of the American Council of Nationalities Service; Catholic Charities, which serves as the diocesan arm of the United States Catholic conference; and the Woonsocket office of the Tolstoy Foundation. A few refugees were sponsored by the Church World Service and other agencies. Of Rhode Island's recent refugees, about six hundred were from eastern Europe; the rest, for the most part, were from that piece of the world once called French Indo-China.

Many of the Southeast Asians who initially settled in Rhode Island later moved to other states to find better jobs or to join family members. For the very same reasons, others moved into this

state. According to McLaughlin, the inflow in 1986 was much greater than the outflow. Most of Rhode Island's Southeast Asians by 1987 were approaching the five-year residence mark, at which they might apply for citizenship and then be eligible to vote. Meanwhile, all were paying taxes, whether citizens or not.



Hmong woman and children at a Southeast Asian arts festival at Roger Williams Park, 1985.

In 1986 it was estimated that one in six or eight students in the public schools of Providence had a Southeast Asian name and spoke his or her native tongue at home. Extrapolating from school census figures, it was estimated that 5,600 Cambodians, 2,170 Laotians, and 2,300 Hmongs lived in Providence. Another 1,000 Laotians resided in Woonsocket. About 200 of the state's 488 Vietnamese also lived in Woonsocket. But, said McLaughlin, these figures were only "guesstimates"; the total number of Southeast Asians in Rhode Island may have been as high as 14,000 or as low as 10,000.

"They all look alike," say some Rhode Islanders. "And they all come from some country over there near China." Amusingly enough, such imprecision is not restricted to the state's natives. One refugee says that when he first arrived, he had trouble differentiating among his several sponsors, since, as he explains, "All American look same."

That "country over there" is not one country but three distinct nations, each with its own history and its unique language, ritual, costumes, and customs. Sadly, the histories of these countries, like those of Western nations, are filled with war-stained chapters.

A surprising number of Vietnamese are Catholics, and because of that some of them have experienced the trauma of refugeeship twice. If they were living in the north in 1954, they had to flee to South Vietnam to escape persecution by the Communists. The Reverend Peter Minh, a refugee priest living in Boston, has tended to the spiritual needs of the approximately three hundred Catholic Vietnamese families living in New England. Vietnamese Catholics have tended to join the parishes in which they live, but they usually call on Father Peter for special occasions like weddings.

Several local Protestant and Catholic churches directly sponsored refugee families. Others—notably St. Michael's, Assumption, and St. Patrick's Catholic parishes and Washington Park Methodist and Calvary Baptist churches, all in Providence—have given ongoing help to refugees living in their neighborhoods. In northern Rhode Island, volunteers from several Protestant and Catholic churches organized the Friends of Refugee Families, which has been helping refugees since the summer of 1975.

Some Southeast Asians became Christians after they arrived, but most, like other immigrants before them, cherish the freedom to maintain their own religious beliefs and practices and to instill them in their children. Most Southeast Asian people are Buddhists, though Buddhism is interpreted differently in each country.



At the Cambodians' Hanover Street temple, monks lead lives of quiet meditation amid the rubble and hubbub of South Providence. Photo by William D. Mirabelli.



A Lao prayer gathering at a private home in Woonsocket. The food and flowers are symbolic offerings; the candle signifies long life, warmth, and worship. Photo by Khamfeua Haleudeth.

At first these new Americans had neither the time nor the resources to build elaborate Buddhist religious-cultural centers. However, the Cambodians established a tenement-temple at 178 Hanover Street, Providence, and this building has served also as headquarters for the Khmer Buddhist Society of New England, led by the Venerable Maha Ghosananda. In January 1986 the state's Laotian Buddhists founded the Lao Buddhist Society of Rhode Island, with the goal of establishing a religious-cultural center of their own.

Many of Rhode Island's Southeast Asians are sending help to relatives who are not yet free. Since the United States has neither diplomatic nor economic relations with Laos, Vietnam, or Cambodia, it is impossible to send money into those countries. However, fabric and other items which can be sold by the recipients can be shipped by mail (a maximum of two pounds) or via Air France out of Boston (a maximum of twenty pounds).

It is easier to help relatives who have reached refugee camps in Thailand or other countries of first asylum, where American money orders can be cashed. These people, too, desperately need such help, for even in the better compounds rice is often the only food distributed, and refugees must depend on relatives in the United States to send money with which to purchase vegetables or fish or a bit of meat. Although in some instances refugees can work at small jobs and pay for food, usually there is no work in the camps, or refugees are forced to work without pay.

One Laotian Rhode Islander recalls that when he was a camp resident, "We almost have trouble—fight," because the Thai camp director was giving the refugees only three cups of rice daily and they knew he was receiving an allotment equal to four cups per refugee per day. In some refugee camps water is in such short supply that each family receives only one gallon per day—barely enough to cook with. Refugees have to buy extra water if they wish to wash their bodies or their clothes.

Considering that relatives may have to remain in refugee camps for two or more years, helping them is a terrible drain on the meager resources of Southeast Asian Rhode Islanders. What is particularly discouraging is that much of what is sent is "lost" before it reaches the people it was meant for, especially if the goods go to Laos, Vietnam, or Cambodia.

Is it imprudent to send such help? Who would say "No, I won't even try" to a letter from one's wife or mother, a letter in which she says she is starving?

The New Americans

Southeast Asian refugees arrived in Rhode Island with all the handicaps that confronted such earlier newcomers as the Italians, the Irish, the French Canadians, and the Portuguese. In addition, they entered an even more complicated society than their predecessors did, one that demands more skills and education. And they carry a heavy load of unique problems as well.

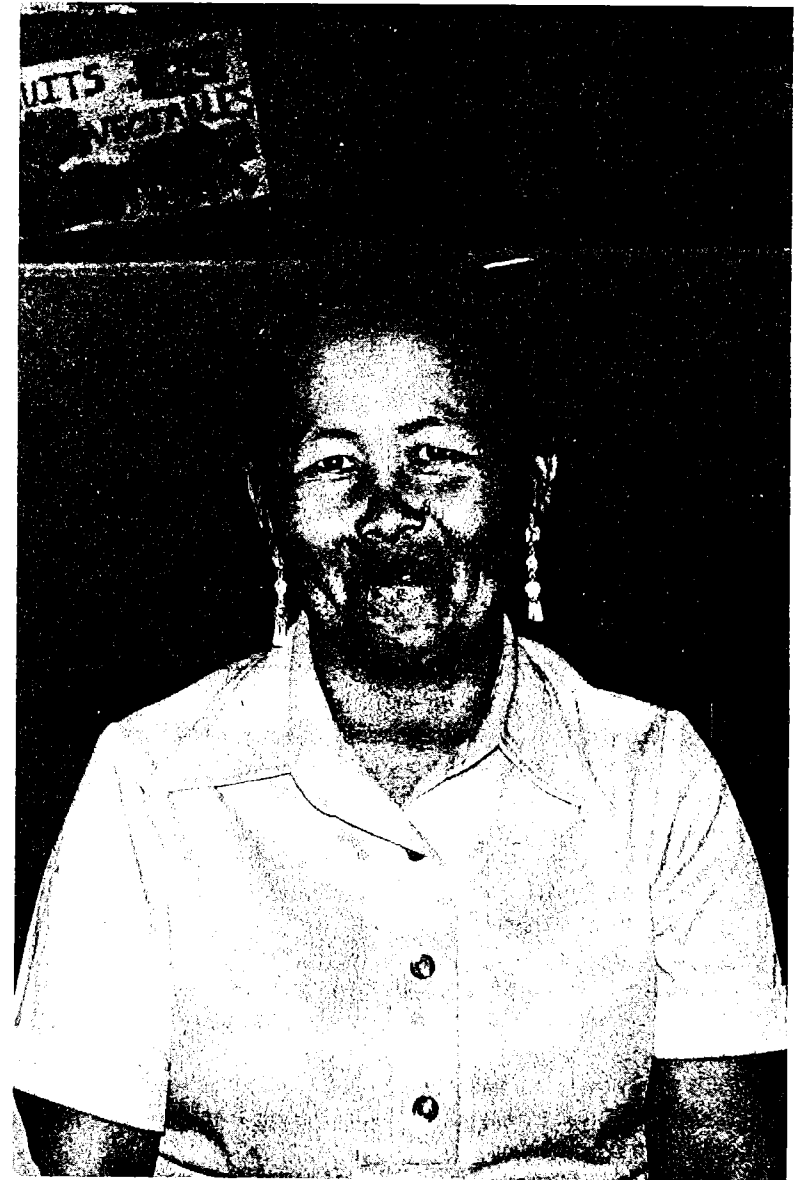
Communication is the biggest hurdle of all. Four major Southeast Asian languages are currently spoken in Rhode Island. Each language is completely different from the others, and all are utterly unrelated to English. Each has a different alphabet. All are tonal languages; that is, the meanings of words change according to the pitch at which they are spoken. The sounds of the English language are totally foreign to those who speak these Southeast Asian languages.

The inability to communicate in English places a severe burden on the Southeast Asians. As John Harwood, president of the Genesis Foundation, observed, "It deprives them of access to jobs, health care, decent housing, and the public services available to English-speaking citizens. It denies them the opportunity of becoming productive, contributing members of their new society."

Since the four groups speak different languages, it is not uncommon to see two Southeast Asians struggling to communicate with one another in halting English. Inadequate as their English may be, it is likely the only language they have in common.

Southeast Asian children pick up English readily in school and, if very young, soon speak without an accent. Older children learn to speak correct English, but they may carry an accent into their later lives. Adults have a harder time with English. Like European and Middle Eastern immigrants before them, some Southeast Asian parents ask their children to interpret for them, although this practice upsets the traditional parent-child relationship: an adult is supposed to know more than a child.

Many adults find it impossible to attend English-as-a-second-language classes because they are working long hours in factories or because they are holding two—or even three—jobs. Many mothers with young children have no way to leave home to attend ESL classes either. Nevertheless, by going without sleep or other things most people consider necessities, some adult Southeast Asians have managed to acquire American college degrees. They have traded their work jeans and lunch boxes for gray flannel suits and Diners Club cards—much to the consternation of other American workers not



Hope for better days shines in the eyes of a Hmong woman who is studying survival skills at the Genesis Preparatory School, 620 Potters Avenue, Providence, a training center for all refugees established by the Reverend Daniel Trainor and Sister Angela Daniels of the Indochinese Advocacy Project. Photo by William D. Mirabelli.

willing to make the same sacrifices. Asked how he could work such long hours doing bullwork in a factory and then rush off to night classes at a college, one man said, "Under Communists, we work much longer hours. And we keep nothing."

The extended family, which is common in Asian social structure, is a great economic resource. A worker making minimum wages, for example, can hardly afford a new car, but if all working members of his family pool their salaries, a family car can be bought. It may be used for getting to work, going shopping, visiting relatives, going fishing . . . and it will serve as a proud symbol of freedom!

Mutual-Aid Asscciations

To Westerners, mutual-aid societies might seem to be the practical answer to most resettlement problems, economic as well as cultural. In the old sections of many American cities, one can still see signs displayed that show that here is where such groups as the Portuguese-Americans, the Italian-Americans, or the Franco-Americans established and still operate credit unions, co-ops, insurance programs, and social organizations. However, Southeast Asian people are family-oriented, rather than nationality-oriented. Mutual-aid groups do not mean as much to them.

"Family strength can be an inhibiting factor," points out Alan Dieffenbach, former associate executive director of the Rhode Island Council for Community Services and later coordinator of the Rhode Island Refugee Mental Health Planning Project. "The [Southeast Asian] family is so important, there's not much left over for the rest of the community. Family is the approved priority."

The Hmongs are the exception, according to Dieffenbach. "Their MAA was well on its way long before the government got in. They assessed their members and shared their resources. The Hmongs could very well become very successful here. Being tribe-oriented, they possess the most important ingredient for a group to be successful: the ability to work together. The successful Hmong individuals aren't turning their backs on their own people. And, of all the groups, the Hmongs seem to have protected their culture [to a greater degree] intact."

Being of Western mind, the United States government established mutual-aid associations for each ethnic group. These were operated by refugees with monies allotted by the Office of Refugee Resettlement established in each state. The associations became, in effect, new government-paid agencies, providing much-needed social

services, but they did not become the self-supporting organizations implied by the term "mutual."

By October 1987 federal money to assist refugees had shrunk dramatically, and still more shrinkage was imminent; and so, in an economy move, the Rhode Island Office of Refugee Resettlement set up a coalition of the four ethnic groups to provide as many social services as possible with the dwindling funds. The officers and staff of this new unit, the Socio-Economic Development Center for Southeast Asians, represented the four ethnic bodies, and an American, Guy Azza, was appointed coordinator. Headquarters were in the former office of the Cambodian MAA at 620 Potters Avenue, Providence. Listed high on the agenda of the new coalition was the search for grants and other sources of funding as means of staying in business when federal aid would disappear altogether. The mutual-aid associations also embarked at this time on searches for alternative funding in order to continue in their new roles of protectors of their respective cultures.

There have been other manifestations of the Southeast Asian presence in Rhode Island as well. These have included such organizations as a New England Lao soccer league and religious groups such as the Lao Buddhist Society of Rhode Island and the Khmer Buddhist Society of New England.

Living Conditions

When they first arrived, the refugees needed immediate shelter, food, and some way to pay for these. Following closely in urgency were education (especially language training), medical care, and protection from some American landlords, neighbors, and employers who viewed them as targets for exploitation.

Sad to say, the newcomers have often been victimized by American neighbors who themselves were at the bottom of the socioeconomic ladder and resented these "intruders." Without knowledge of the American legal system or of their rights, and with little or no English with which to express themselves to those who might help, Southeast Asian victims have too often suffered in silence.

Police officials, seeing no complaints on their logs, conclude there are no problems. Meanwhile, windows and windshields are being broken, tires slashed, children attacked en route to and from school, people assaulted and robbed on the streets and even in their own homes. With knives at their throats, Southeast Asian people

are being threatened with retribution if they complain to the police. As one refugee said:

People are afraid to go to store for food or laundry. The robber knocks down old men and old ladies and takes their things. Almost every day this happens while the daytime is still here. Every time the police come too late and the robber is gone. People run home and cry very much. Now they have no food to eat.

In an effort to learn Southeast Asians' perception of the police, Sister Angela Daniels, codirector of the Indo-Chinese Advocacy Project, questioned many Providence and Woonsocket refugees through their bilingual representatives. The police did not emerge from the survey with shining images. Here are two typical answers:

I have been in this country for five years. I am a refugee who just came from starvation, the political persecution, the hunger and much death. I am not an American citizen yet. I am angry about the police. They do not respect the rights of the refugees because some are not citizens, but some are citizens and more will become citizens. Not only once, but many times the crime of the thief, robber, and people who do not like the refugees happen in my neighborhood. We came for peace and to be happy with our neighbor. I think the police do not like us in America. I do not like the police either. I will not call them.

Why are we treated like the criminal instead of the one who had the crime committed against them? Do the police know of our very horrible history? Some people and police, too, think we are all Vietnamese and do not like us because of the war. We suffered so hard in the war. We helped the Americans. Why don't they know this?

The same handicaps—limited English and ignorance of their rights—make Southeast Asian Rhode Islanders easy victims of slum landlords. Some owners collect rents promptly but are not available to make essential repairs to toilets that do not flush, heating systems that do not heat, roofs that leak, wood that rots, broken stairs, or broken windows. Living in substandard housing is by no means cheap. Newcomers have found it also dangerous, uncomfortable, and downright dehumanizing.

According to former refugee-resettlement official Paul McLaughlin, Cambodians and Laotians who can afford it have begun moving to Cranston. The refugees came seeking peace, but peace is not to be found in the slums of Providence or Woonsocket.

Jobs

Rhode Island, unfortunately, is the home of many industries offering low-skill, low-paying, dead-end jobs. Many Southeast Asian

workers find themselves locked into these positions, where they are usually assigned to the least-desired second and third shifts. This kind of factory life is especially hard on those who had been farmers or fishermen, used to working in harmony with nature, and it is equally difficult for the former physicians, attorneys, teachers, and military leaders who now find their educations worthless because of language and culture differences.

One man described conditions in a certain Woonsocket plant:

Some work seven day a week, twelve hour every day. They need money to support family and to send to refugee camp. There is no union. We don't want to talk. We're scared to lose jobs. Some time, when you go to see supervisor when you're sick, he say, "Go home and never come back."

One man want to take time off to go see wife with new baby in hospital. Supervisor say, "If you go, don't come back." He go anyway. He want to see wife and baby. When he apply for unemployment compensation, he not get help because company say he quit.

Such conditions as these have been all too common for the Southeast Asian worker. Nevertheless, Southeast Asians have chalked up an excellent work record, according to McLaughlin. Those who seek government assistance of any kind are usually recipients for only a very short time.

The refugees usually had nothing when they arrived. Getting off a plane at T. F. Green Airport in mid-December, they were likely to be wearing cotton slacks or skirts, T-shirts, and sandals, the customary attire in a tropical refugee camp. If they had any other worldly possessions, they were usually carried in a plastic sack no larger than a grocery bag.

Mercifully, they were able to apply immediately for federal refugee-resettlement money through the local Department of Human Services office—a grant to sustain them until they found employment—and they were also eligible for food stamps. Eventually, because of age or permanent disability, a few received SSI payments.

But for most Southeast Asians, government aid has been no more than a temporary expedient. In April 1986 only 749 Southeast Asians here more than thirty-six months were still on public assistance, a dependency rate of only 13 or 14 percent. This group was made up of widows with small children, large families whose wage earners did not earn enough to support them, and similar cases.

In spite of unique and terrible handicaps, some Southeast Asian Rhode Islanders have managed to buy homes and start businesses. By April 1986, Laotian, Cambodian, Vietnamese, and Hmong



A Vietnamese beauty, Trang Thuy Thi Nguyen, poses next to sacks of rice at her parents' store in Woonsocket. Photo courtesy of the Woonsocket Call.

entrepreneurs operated twenty-nine businesses in Providence, Woonsocket, Cranston, and Warwick, according to a report of Asian Small Business Development, Inc. Rhode Island businesses owned by Southeast Asians included thirteen food stores, four jewelry stores, two wholesale businesses, three service stations, a bar, a video store, a clothing store, a furniture store, and three restaurants. Other businesses had failed; but the owners of these enterprises had gone back to the factory and started saving again, preparing to reappear in the marketplace. That is the kind of people the Southeast Asians are.

The next generation will be even more successful. In elementary and secondary schools, Southeast Asian students' names have been appearing in surprising numbers on honor rolls. Prizes and scholarships are being won, not in football or hockey, but in sciences and the arts and, of all things, foreign languages like French and Spanish. During the 1985-86 academic year more than 250 Southeast Asian students were enrolled at the University of Rhode Island alone, and more were attending colleges in this state and elsewhere. Obviously, Rhode Island will soon have hundreds of Southeast Asian engineers, computer scientists, mathematicians, and other professionals.

Some Special Problems

Southeast Asian newcomers to Rhode Island have been susceptible to all the problems usually associated with poverty, the usual illnesses, the usual family stresses. But they have their own special problems as well.

Simple communication is a tremendous hurdle. Those who were lawyers, teachers, doctors, or military officers back home find that their skills are useless here if they can not speak English well or if they can not obtain professional certification. Those with no education at all are at an even greater disadvantage. Some were fishermen or farmers, but where can they fish or farm in South Providence or Providence's West End?

The refugees' heaviest burdens, however, are their memories. If the Cambodian woman you meet in the supermarket seems depressed, perhaps it is because she is remembering her husband and three sons whom the Communists took away and killed, and her four daughters who died afterwards of starvation.

If a Hmong worker in your plant seems to be suffering from psychosomatic symptoms, perhaps it is because he saw so many

of his friends and relatives killed while he was fighting for the survival of his country. Perhaps it is because he spent so much time in a Red reeducation camp, regularly beaten and shackled and placed in solitary confinement because he refused to become a reeducated Communist.

If a Cambodian acquaintance seems to show symptoms of battle fatigue, perhaps it is because he, too, was in a reeducation camp, and he lost so much weight his wife did not recognize him when he finally limped home.

If you observe a Laotian woman having difficulty swallowing her food, perhaps it is because she is thinking of her husband, a former government official who is serving an indefinite term in an equally notorious reeducation camp.

It is proper to rejoice with a Vietnamese man who is exulting in the ownership of a car, for to him a car symbolizes liberty, something he has gambled his very life to gain. It is proper to rejoice with him, that is, until the day he receives a long-awaited letter from his sister, a letter that says that she and her children are starving; her late husband was a lieutenant in the South Vietnamese Army, and so now she is targeted for Communist persecution.



Barbara Meas, held by her Cambodian mother Pauline, is a United States citizen by birth. For her, the trials of war and family tragedy will only be stories, heard when her mother speaks of "the old days." Photo by William D. Mirabelli.

The Culture of the Southeast Asians

Because Southeast Asia has historically been such a crossroad of cultural activity, the people of Vietnam, Cambodia, and Laos display a great diversity of cultural patterns. The Lao, the Hmong, the Vietnamese, and the Cambodians now living in Rhode Island reflect that diversity and the thousands of years of history in which it developed.

For more than two thousand years, Chinese, Indian, and Oceanic visitors influenced the languages, customs, and institutions of Southeast Asia. European Christians began to exert their influences five hundred years ago. Compared to these epochs, the Vietnam War and subsequent Communist oppression are but historical footnotes—fairly insignificant except to those victims who have to live out those footnotes.

Among the religions of the East, a common theme is the search for peace and harmony. Important too is the great respect given to ancestors, though what is commonly called "ancestor worship" means merely commemoration, not the adoration that is reserved for God.

Southeast Asian people hold teachers in high regard. Parents never question either the content or the method a teacher uses to educate their children, and thus they may seem uncooperative because they avoid involvement with their children's school. Newly arrived Southeast Asian children may seem passive because they ask no questions. Yet these examples of behavior stem directly from the fact that back home it is considered extremely bad manners to question a teacher. It is considered rude, too, for a child to look a teacher in the eye.

Once the children adapt to the American way of learning, however, they move ahead rapidly. Their thirst for knowledge and



Y Thi Dang, age 85, and Hoa Thi Pham, age 7, at the 1987 Tet celebration.
Photo courtesy of the Woonsocket Call.

China eight hundred years ago, these Vietnamese retained many of their Chinese traditions.

Rhode Island's Vietnamese-Americans annually celebrate Tet, their New Year, at a gathering in Holy Family Church Hall, Woonsocket. Similar daylong parties are held at the same time of year in Boston and other New England cities, and some Vietnamese attend them all. This festival is described in *The Peoples and Cultures of Cambodia, Laos, and Vietnam*, a recent and authoritative text:

The most important and picturesque feast of the year is Tet, or Lunar New Year, which usually occurs in the month of February. It is a family reunion, a spring festival and a national holiday. Since Vietnamese do not celebrate each individual's birthday, Tet is also considered everyone's birthday, because everyone is one year older on Tet. This is a time to pay homage to ancestors, visit family and friends, observe traditional taboos, and, of course, celebrate. Tet is also the time to correct faults, forget past mistakes, pardon others for their offenses, and pay debts. On this occasion, houses are specially decorated with flowering branches. Tet is usually celebrated for three days, although there is only one official holiday.

The basic food of the Vietnamese is rice, supplemented by vegetables, eggs, and small amounts of meat and fish. Soy sauce

or fish sauce is used to flavor almost every dish. Like many Asian people, most Vietnamese are not genetically equipped with the enzymes needed to digest dairy foods properly; thus sponsors were surprised to find that their new friends did not like ice cream, since it did not agree with them. Miss Ngoc Andren, a 1986 graduate of the University of Rhode Island, recalls that in 1975, when she was in a Pennsylvania refugee camp awaiting sponsorship, she heard a rumor that there is no rice in the United States. "We thought we would have to eat potatoes for the rest of our lives! We were very sad," she says.

The Vietnamese language uses the Roman alphabet. It is the only Southeast Asian language that does, but it is a tonal language, like the others, and employs five accents to indicate the appropriate tones. As a consequence of French rule in Vietnam, from the late 1800s to 1945 French was used in Vietnamese schools and in the conduct of government business, and it continued to be taught as the country's major foreign language until the 1960s. Then, with so many American servicemen in Vietnam, English became the predominant second language.

The Vietnamese people—especially the urban ones—are perhaps the most westernized of the Southeast Asians, and so, in spite of all their puzzling customs, they posed the fewest problems for the sponsors of the new immigrant groups. Today most Vietnamese have left Rhode Island to live in other parts of the United States where they feel there are better jobs, better opportunities to start businesses, and more of their fellow countrymen.

The Hmong

In 1987 Providence had the largest Hmong community east of the Mississippi River. And a very interesting group of people it is—very different from the Vietnamese or Cambodians, very different even from the lowland Laotians who shared the same homeland, a landlocked nation bounded by China, Vietnam, Cambodia, Thailand, and Burma.

In their homeland the Hmong people's unique language, dress, rituals, and agricultural customs were protected by the remoteness of their mountain villages. Today the Hmongs are striving to preserve their culture as they struggle to adapt to Rhode Island winters and the barren urban setting of South Providence, even while suffering the loss of their former homes and many loved ones.

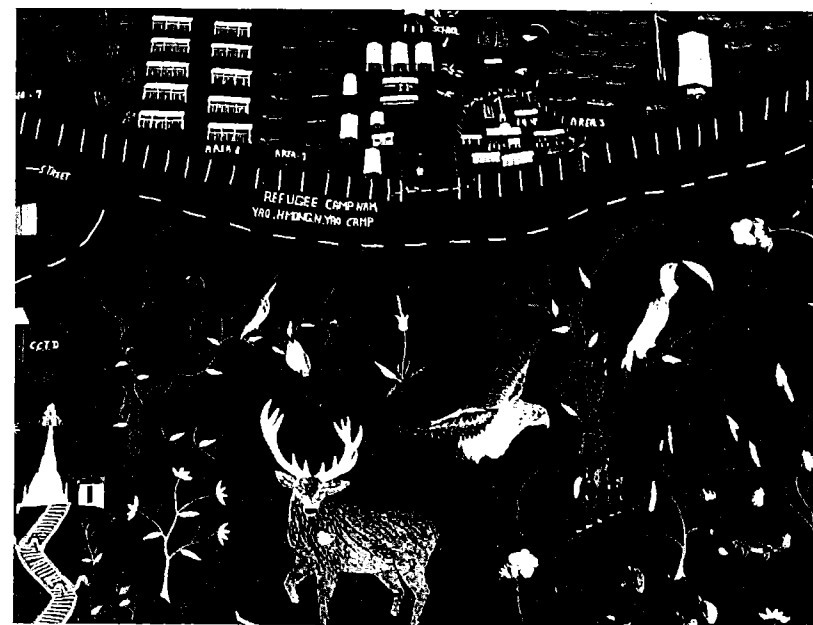


Master weaver Yang Fang Nhu harvests bamboo at Blithewold Gardens and Arboretum, Bristol, to construct a Hmong loom. Photo © 1985 by Winifred Lambrecht.

Hmong women are famous for a special kind of needlework called *pan dau*. Literally translated, this means "flower of cloth," but more accurately it means "decorated cloth." A single *pan dau* may incorporate batik dyeing, appliqué, reverse appliqué, fold-and-tuck designs, multicolored embroidery, or any combination thereof. Distinctive styles of *pan dau* identify one Hmong group from another.

Pan dau was traditionally used to decorate clothing worn at New Year's celebrations. This decoration was especially important to young people, since New Year was the only time they were allowed to court. Also, the mother of a young woman about to have a baby would give her daughter a *pan dau* baby carrier.

Pan dau may once have served another purpose as well. There is a story that in ancient times Chinese conquerors killed anyone who spoke the Hmong language. The women therefore hid their alphabet in the embroidery and batik of their clothing and preserved their language in pictorial form.

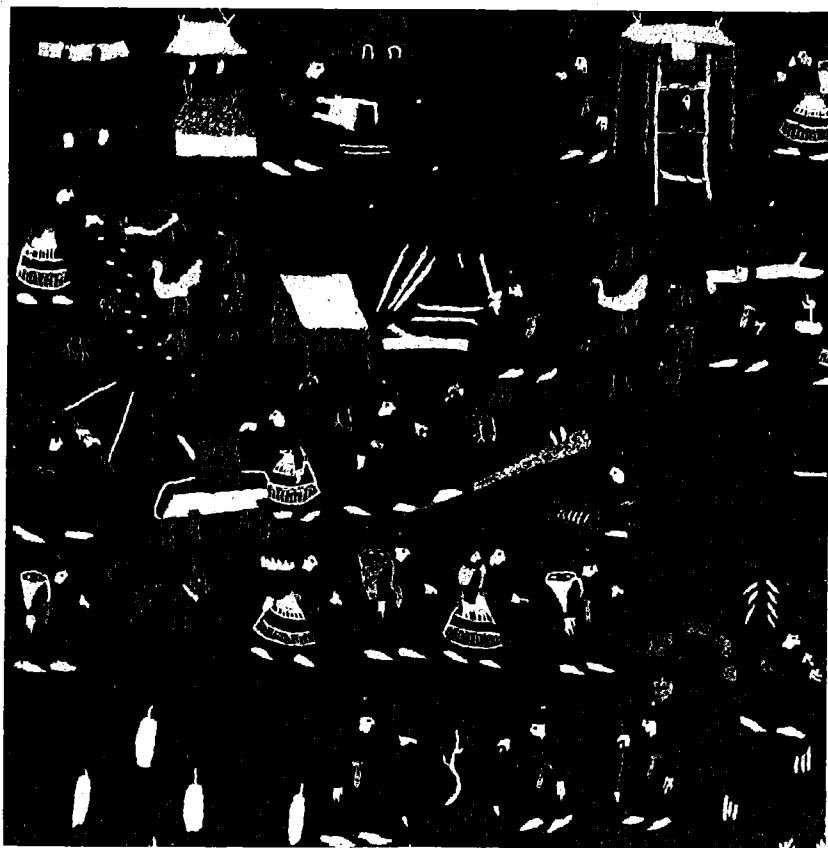


*This "story cloth" *pan dau* offers a panoramic view of the Nam Yao Refugee Camp in Thailand. Depicted in the surrounding jungle are a temple, birds and animals, and (lower right) refugees making their way to the camp. Photo © 1984 by Winifred Lambrecht.*

Pan dau is not something that comes in a kit, ready to stitch. Back home in Laos a Hmong woman first had to grow the cotton, harvest it, and then spin it into thread. After bleaching and stretching the thread, she would weave it into cloth on a homemade loom, color it with vegetable dyes, and only then begin the stitching.

A woman's ability to create pan dau is highly valued. A young girl learning this art must memorize hundreds of basic design elements. Since a Hmong seamstress may spend an hour creating one inch of embroidery, it can be difficult to price pan dau to attract American buyers and still be fair to the crafts person.

Singing is another creative art among the Hmong. Songs are always improvised to some extent, and thus a new song is created



Preparing the soil, sowing crops, and feeding chickens and pigs are among the farming activities represented in this pan dau. From the collection of Gail C. Cahalan; photo by Edd Spidell.

every time. According to Dr. Amy Catlin, former director of the Center for Hmong Lore at the Roger Williams Park Museum, Hmong melodies have only four notes. The rhyme scheme is set up like a puzzle, and listeners amuse themselves by trying to guess how the singer will solve the puzzle. Singing plays a prominent part on many occasions. Among these are Hmong funerals, where men are responsible for the singing at the three-day-long ceremonies.

Hmong people like to grow their own favorite vegetables and medicinal herbs, and whenever a swatch of land is made available to them at such places as Roger Williams Park, they plant a garden. Like other Rhode Islanders, they look upon the waters of Narragansett Bay as a source of fresh fish and shellfish. Since they were accustomed to cooking with freshly slaughtered ducks, chickens, and pigs, they find the meat and poultry available in supermarkets generally unappealing. Rice, of course, is all-important in their diet. A Hmong cook will serve short-grain, nonglutinous rice for everyday meals and glutinous, or "sticky," rice on special festival days.

The Hmongs have cultural strictures against touching the head. They believe, also, that if a person's body is cut, the soul will be released and perhaps not find its way back. Thus, one of the most frightening experiences a refugee can undergo is Western-style medical treatment. Such treatment is especially fraught with stress if there is no Hmong interpreter to bridge the cultural gap between doctor and patient. A Caesarean section, for example, can be psychologically devastating.

Back in Laos, Hmongs sought therapy from shamans, who consulted with spirits and provided care through time-honored ritual. Xoua Thao, the son of one such shaman, was the first Hmong to earn a bachelor's degree from Brown University and the first to earn a degree from medical school. While he was in school, his father, Chadang Thao of Providence, worked in a chicken-processing plant in Johnston, while his mother, Xang Yang Thao, was employed in a Providence jewelry factory.

Aware of his father's belief that shamanism in America is on the verge of being lost, Xoua hopes to capture some of Chadang Thao's insights into mental illness and combine them with his own knowledge of western medicine. "We had a neat system of traditional healing in Laos," says Xoua confidently. "It worked for centuries. It was effective. It can be of value to Western medicine."

The Cambodians

Of all the war-wracked refugees who have arrived in Rhode Island, the Cambodians are, as a group, the ones carrying the greatest burdens of sorrow. "The Cambodian community is generally recognized as having sustained the most traumatic life experiences," writes Rita C. Michaelson in her *Report on the Southeast Asian Refugees in Rhode Island*. "Death and famine from the war and brutal murder at the hands of the Khmer Rouge and Pol Pot affected every family. The subsequent takeover of Cambodia by the Vietnamese even changed the name of their country to Kampuchea."



Cambodian refugees—such as this man, squatting outside the Genesis Preparatory School in Providence—brought with them terrible recollections of their war-ravaged homeland. Photo by William D. Mirabelli.

Most Rhode Island Cambodians are Khmers, members of Cambodia's largest ethnic group. According to Dr. Walter Blanchard of Rhode Island College, a close observer of Cambodian life in this state, there are at least three factions among this group: the Khmer People's Liberation Front, the Royalists, and a few who, although they would be reluctant to admit it now, may have been members of the Khmer Rouge.

A small number of Cambodian people live in Woonsocket, but most make their home in the ethnically diverse West End of

Providence. One reason why Providence has attracted so many Cambodian residents is that the Khmer Buddhist Society of New England operates its temple there, in a second-floor apartment at 178 Hanover Street. To Cambodians, Buddhism is a way of life as well as a religion. One local resident, Dr. Som Chau Yeung, a retired pediatrician from Phnom Penh, moved from Boston to Hanover Street with his wife so that they could go to the temple daily to meditate.

Michael Bell, a local authority on folk culture, observes that in Cambodia

the Khmer temple perpetuates the traditional training of young men as Buddhist monks. During the *Vossa* period (Buddhist Lent) when members of the temple concentrate on their studies of Buddhist scripture, young men who want to enter the monkhood are ordained.

Becoming a monk brings honor to the young man's parents and marks the passage from adolescence to adulthood. A young man is ordained at the age of 19 or 20 and spends one rainy season within the monastery. When he leaves, he is free to marry and to depart from the home of his parents.

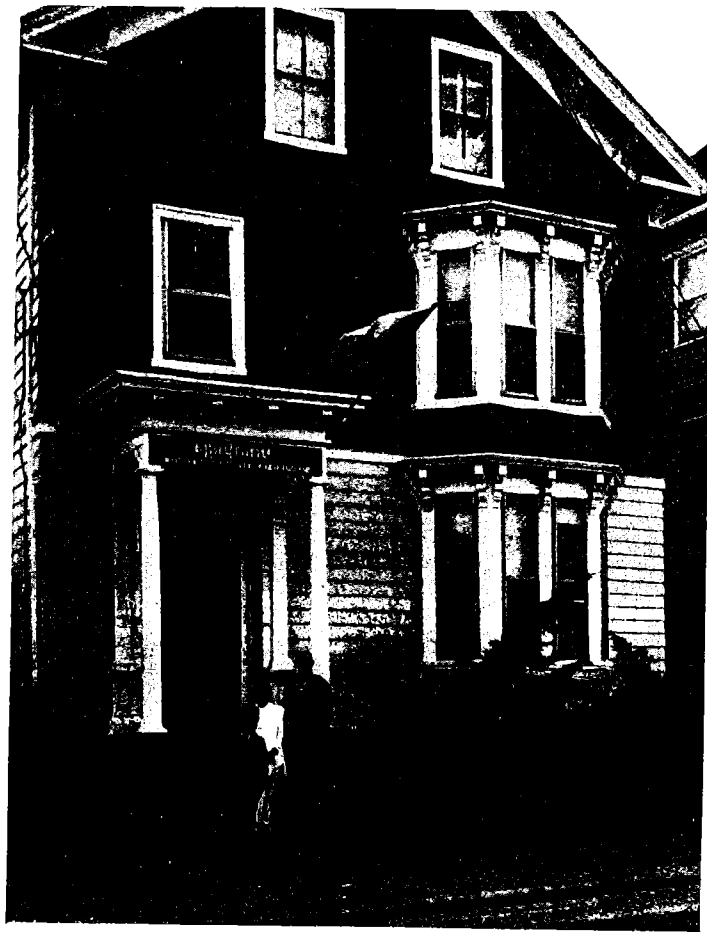
[In August 1985] the Providence monastery ordained seven young men, orphaned Cambodian refugees who have been adopted by American families. Although they have accepted Christianity and are enrolled in New England prep schools, they willingly, eagerly had their heads shaved and took on the yellow robes to know the culture of their ancestors. As one young man stated, "It makes us feel Cambodian again . . ."

The Venerable Maha Ghosananda established the local temple. "He is a true ascetic," says Dr. Blanchard. "Wherever the zephyrs take him, he goes. A true holy man who cannot bind himself to time and place." The elderly Buddhist nuns who tend the temple are described by Dr. Blanchard as "rich repositories of old Cambodian traditions."

"Like any other nationality, Cambodians have all kinds of talents, including art, poetry, and writing," notes Dr. Blanchard. School guidance counselors are therefore mistaken if they think Southeast Asian students can excel only in mathematics, engineering, and computer science, he says.

In happier days, music was part of daily Khmer life. From boxing matches to banquets, there was always live music. Khmer music, like Khmer architecture, sculpture, literature, and dance, is characterized principally by its spiritual nature. Its purpose is to purify the heart and elevate the mind.

The most important Khmer holiday is the New Year, a three-day celebration beginning April 13. This is a time for attending religious ceremonies and classical dance performances, a time to visit relatives and friends and to take food to the temple. In September



The Venerable Maha Ghosananda (right), Sister Sophon So (center), and a young Cambodian boy in front of the Khmer Buddhist Society's tenement-temple in Providence.

Cambodians observe All Souls' Day, a day of prayer for the souls of those who have died. Weddings, which are also notable occasions, are celebrated with a morning religious ceremony and an afternoon parry with large gatherings of family and friends and lots of food.

According to Dr. Blanchard, some Providence Cambodian families occasionally suffer economic hardship because their men resort to still another Cambodian custom: when a husband becomes overwhelmed with his responsibilities, he takes a "sabbatical" and goes to live for a while as a monk. But there are financial success stories too. By 1987 at least two Cambodians were licensed to sell

real estate, and three Providence jewelry stores, three restaurants, three food stores, and one wholesale business were Cambodian-owned.

Cambodians consider the head to be the most important part of the body, the place where the spirit resides, and to touch someone's head is regarded as an insult. Thus an American who affectionately pats a Cambodian child on the head is not looked upon as a friend at all, unless the child's parents have been here long enough to tolerate such strange behavior.

So, too, is there room for misunderstanding when two Cambodian youths are seen hugging one another or holding hands. In Cambodia, as in other parts of Southeast Asia, these are perfectly acceptable signs of friendship between two persons of the same sex.

The Lao

Ethnic Lao is the term used to identify those people who lived in the cities and villages along the rivers of Laos. This is to distinguish them from the Hmong, who lived in the highlands, and such other ethnic groups as the Khmer. A separate race, the ethnic Lao once constituted approximately half the population of Laos.

Many aspects of Lao culture can be observed each April when the local Lao population gathers to celebrate Pema Lao, its New Year. The morning of this celebration is devoted to religious rites. The New Year is also a time to say thanks and to ask forgiveness for past wrongs. For the young men there may be *kato*, a game somewhat like volleyball, in which players manipulate the ball not only with their hands but also with their heads, feet, knees, and elbows. In speaking of the *kato* players, Sounthone Sayarath of Johnston expressed a typical American complaint: "They have not enough time to practice," he said. "They work all the time."

Speeches and meetings take up the afternoon hours of the celebration. Then, in the evening, Lao people from all over New England gather to enjoy dancing and traditional food. Many women wear their traditional garb. Everyone dances the slow, graceful Lao way, making hands "dance" as much as feet. Later, contemporary music takes over and the young people engage in rock-and-roll and break dancing.

The cultural highlight of the celebration, however, is the appearance of a dozen or more young girls who are trained in classical Lao dance. These girls perform at all major Lao events, as well

red and gold embroidered silk, brought to this country by her aunt when she made her escape to freedom in 1979. The bridegroom, Sarky Sourasack Soukamneuth of Providence, was no less splendid, attired in draped, knickerlike trousers and a long tunic of silver and gold brocade tied with golden cords.

The bride's hair, piled high on her head, was encircled with many strands of gold beads. Tiny golden bells hung from the fringe of her stole. She wore long golden earrings, a gold pin, and a gold locket on a chain. "The jewelry comes from her grandmother and has been in her family for a long, long time," explained Sayarath. It was later returned to a bank vault to await the next wedding in the family.

Following Lao custom, the newlyweds went to live with the bride's mother in Woonsocket. In 1987 they bought a house in Providence. Both are graduates of the University of Rhode Island, and both worked as computer programmer-analysts.

At Buddhist weddings the principals make their wedding promises not to a clergyman but to an elder of their family. This means that in Rhode Island they must later go before a judge or clergyman to make their marriage legal. Guests at the Buddhist rites, seated on a ceremonial mat around the couple, are not simply observers: this union of two people is seen as a community affair. While the elder chants a long litany of advice for living successfully together, friends and relatives periodically interrupt with the Buddhist equivalent of "Amen." As on other occasions, at weddings Lao people tie lengths of white string around one another's wrists, perhaps giving symbolic gifts of food at the same time, to show respect and good will.

The Lao do not traditionally kiss as a form of greeting. Shaking hands is still another strange Western habit that Lao people have had to learn. Their customary way of greeting one another was the *wai*: they joined their hands as if in prayer at a level from the chest to the head, depending on the degree of respect they wanted to express. Between equals, the hands were joined before the chest. For a superior, the hands were brought to the face. Children brought their hands to their heads when greeting a teacher or parent. For God, hands were joined over the head.

Like other new Americans from Cambodia, Vietnam, and the mountains of their own country, the ethnic Lao who now live in Rhode Island came here because they were sick of war and because they could stand the oppression of their Communist conquerors no longer. How do they feel about their new home?

At an elaborate Lao wedding, the bridegroom gave the signal for guests to open bottles of champagne on each table. As corks exploded from one end of the hall to the other, he was moved to observe, "So many bangs and not a bullet anywhere! This is America! All r-i-g-h-t!"

That says it.

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NOTE

Some of the information on Hmong culture in this pamphlet was adapted, with permission, from Michael Bell's *Southeast Asian Folk Arts*, listed above.