

SOUTHEAST-ASIAN REFUGEE PROJECT

Oral History

Carol Bell

FA 83
Box 1
Folder 2

Manuscripts & Folklife Archives
Library Special Collections
Western Kentucky University

Introduction:

The Southeast Asian Refugee Project has been a very pleasant and instructive learning experience for me. I was able to conduct six separate interviews ^{with} of nine different people, five of whom were Cambodian, two Laotian, one who considered herself Chinese although born in Cambodia and a resident there until the age of 11, and one American who gave me her opinion of community reaction to Southeast Asians in Bowling Green.

I did a total of four hours of interviewing on seven tapes. Sometimes my questioning elicited lengthy, detailed answers and reminiscences; sometimes I was able to obtain only "yes" and "no" answers or brief comments. On three occasions, conversation subsequent to the interview revealed as much as, or more than, the interview itself. Apparently in some instances the knowledge that the tape recorder was operating influenced the narrator's answers. I believe it is important to become better acquainted with the narrators before interviewing them; my best interview came from a family I had known before the start of this project.

One semester was not long enough to acquire all the information I needed to write this paper. The people I interviewed comprised too small a cross-section of the refugee community to enable me to generalize about education in Cambodia and Laos, and I did not obtain any information about Vietnamese schools. What I did learn, though, provided valuable and

FA 83
Box 1
Folder 1

interesting insight into the attitudes and reactions of a very small sample group. Some of these comments may be typical and therefore useful when dealing with refugee communities in the future.

My paper will attempt to present the material obtained from the interviews in a consolidated form. Schools (in Southeast Asia) described are small-town schools in Cambodia and schools in refugee camps in Thailand. Customs described are Cambodian or Laotian. Opinions are my own, based on my observations or "reading between the lines" while conducting my interviews.

EDUCATION OF SOUTHEAST ASIAN YOUTH
IN CAMBODIA, LAOS, THAILAND, AND THE UNITED STATES
REVEALED IN TAPE-RECORDED INTERVIEWS

Education before the Khmer Rouge takeover is recalled as a pleasant experience. Beginning in the home with the learning of respect for one's elders and the correct way of doing life's daily activities, education from birth to school age (six or seven years) was described in detail for me.

Babies were fed breast milk and nothing else, at least until they had teeth and could chew semi-solid food. They were not clothed until they were five or six years old and capable of keeping their clothing clean. (Although there is a rainy season and a dry season in these countries, the climate is tropical and sufficiently hot all year round that no clothing is necessary for warmth.) Homes in the country frequently were built with only one room where all living activities took place, and sleeping mats were the only beds. Almost all of the learning took place as a result of following the examples of older family members. Cleanliness was one of these lessons; everyone bathed at least once daily in the streams or lakes, and little children went along and were bathed by bowls of water poured over them until they were old enough to go into the water themselves.

City life was somewhat different; homes looked more like the ones seen in the United States, and early recollections of

FA83
Box 1
Folder 1

Yong Chau include being sent to shop in stores, and accompanying her father on evening walks when she learned through conversations with him and when they bought dessert and ate it in the park.

Naren Hak was the only person I interviewed who remembered hearing stories told to children to illustrate lessons to be learned--stories with a moral. The stories most narrators recalled hearing were "things about the old days" and were told by adults to other adults and young people at evening gatherings. When pressed to be specific, informants were vague about whether these were family reminiscences or legends and myths about ancient times in Cambodia and Laos. However, Naren's story was a "bedtime" story which taught respect for elders (See Appendix A).

Recollections of parental admonitions were almost nonexistent. Apparently there is little conversation between parents and pre-schoolers. "Not talk much," was the way Datt explained it. But there are memories of loving care. Illness was generally cured by someone in the family who "knew the right things"--leaves, bark, or roots gathered in the woods and soaked or cooked to make a decoction to drink or apply externally. "Old people knew these things," Ye Chak told me, "and usually the drinks tasted bad, but they knew what would make you better." For a sickness that could not be cured by a family remedy, there were doctors in the cities; but these were not accessible to people living in rural areas. However, there were local healers--men with power--who could be called

FA83
Box 1
Folder 1

in or to whom one could be taken if necessary. No women were described as having this power, more about this later.

When a child was considered to be ready for school, new clothes were provided--blouses and wraparound skirts for girls, shirts and similar but shorter skirts for boys. In some schools uniforms were required, white shirts and blouses and dark blue pants and skirts. In rural areas no transportation was available and children walked to school. School lasted all day, usually 8 a.m. to 3 p.m., with no lunch break, no snacks, nothing to eat all day from breakfast in the early morning till the evening meal at home.

In the home, no food was considered to be a real meal without rice. Fish was another staple, both freshwater and saltwater when available. Pigs and chickens were raised for food, also fruits and vegetables, and game such as rabbits and other small rodents was eaten.

School lessons were reading and writing at first. Students had to provide their own slates and slate pencils. There were large blackboards for the teachers. After one had learned to read and write, arithmetic and other subjects were added. History of Asia was important, but none of my informants remembered learning about the United States. Some students learned French as well as their native language, but English was not taught, at least not in rural schools.

Discipline was strict. A punishment frequently administered was described by My Vang: "we had to put our fingers together like this"--bunching all five fingers so that the

FA83
Box 1
Folder 1

tips are clustered at the same level--"and then the teacher would hit the ends of our fingers with a stick." Did this hurt? "Yes, very sore." Both boys and girls were beaten, for such offenses as contradicting the teacher, or having been absent when an important lesson was taught. A punishment for being late for school was mentioned; boys had to run around and around the school building "until your tongue came out." Chear Mounn reported having done this "many, many times."

School was available from 12th grade, the first year one attended, to 1st grade, the final year if one was promoted through the entire school system. However, Ye Chak explained that she had had only a few months of schooling since her mother had a large family and she was needed to take care of the babies at home. High school was in another building where various subjects were taught by different teachers, but a student stayed in the same room for all classes.

One facet of education described by My Vang [experienced for only two weeks because the communists took over Cambodia before he had an opportunity for further participation] was monk's training. Each young man spent at least a year or two as a monk. When he was finished with schooling, at sixteen to eighteen, monk's education began. His head was shaved and he was provided with a yellow robe and a food bowl. He left his family and went to live at a temple with older monks and students his own age. From then on, the only food he ate was what he received in his food bowl when he begged from other people. At that time he would learn religious duties as well

FA
83
Box 1
Folder 1

as further his education. My's wife claimed that he would be "much smarter" than he now was, if he had continued his monk's education.

If he had remained a monk long enough and if he were brave enough to do so, he could also have acquired special powers from the spirits. These spirits, both good and evil as all people are, would endow one with the power of healing as well as other powers. These powers could only be used to help others. If one used them for evil purposes, the powers would be lost. The process of acquiring them entailed fasting and meditation, as well as prayers to the spirits, in a quiet place--the jungle or a mountainside [Compare Native Americans]. This process was very dangerous to the initiate; evil thoughts or a "bad heart" could cause the spirits to take away your soul.

If the spirits decided that one was worthy of becoming a healer, however, one acquired the ability to heal broken bones in a day or two, just by stroking the skin over the break. Chear Mounn told me that he could go to a doctor for a broken bone, but if it were incumbent that the bone be healed quickly so one could resume work in the field, he would go to a healer instead. Other healing powers were granted by the spirits, and another power was the ability to call spirits of the dead into the body of a living person who had been placed in a trance-like state; questions and advice could be asked of the spirit, who would answer in its own voice, not that of the host body, and give accurate information about its own former life and valuable advice to the living.

FA
83
Box 1
Folder 1

With the coming of the Khmer Rouge, education stopped and everyone was required to work in the fields from dawn to dark, with only a handful or two of rice a day provided as rations. Then education consisted of acquiring the ability to find food to supplement these scanty rations--mice, rats, snakes, cockroaches and other insects, leaves and roots (1).

After escape from Cambodia and Laos, education in refugee camps in Thailand was sporadic and available only when a few people could get together and find someone to teach them. Most of the lessons learned there were simply those of survival, but Yong Chau went to classes held in a tent and learned the Khmer language. Some children did not attend these schools because their parents were afraid they would learn communist ways and become enemies of their own families (2).

If one's family had the money, one could get special tutoring in English in the refugee camps. Yong Chau was able to take advantage of these classes and learned "just a little" English. This was not conversational English, but a basic vocabulary was read and written. Teachers would dictate sentences that students attempted to spell and write correctly.

The lesson of gratitude was taught to Naren Hak and other refugee students by means of a daily "song" to be learned (See Appendix B). Naren told how each week there was a new song ("well, not really a song" was how she expressed it) to be learned and sung, or chanted, at the front of the classroom. A ruler blow on the palm of the hand served as punish-

ment for not learning it well enough and incentive for doing better next day.

In the United States, the first and most important education was learning to speak English (3). Most narrators credited friendly sponsors and helpful teachers with the assistance that made English easy for them to learn, although some older people said it was hard to make themselves understood and that it took two or three years before they could communicate adequately. The refugee assistance center taught many other valuable lessons such as how to find jobs (4), how to shop in stores, preparation for GED testing, and practice in English.

American schools seem very different from those in Laos and Cambodia. One of the most frequently mentioned differences is the poor discipline--the lack of respect for learning and for the teacher who is trying to help one to learn--tolerated in our school systems. John Chak's comment, "no one listens and the teacher doesn't even care," was echoed by Yong Chau and Naren Hak. All of my narrators, however, talked about positive experiences in school and evinced gratitude to the teachers for their patience and help.

In the community of Southeast Asians within Bowling Green, there is apparent a dichotomy between the expectations of these people and the actualization of their plans. Education is of great importance to them; it is perhaps the most frequently mentioned advantage of living in America (5). Yet its realization is hindered by a number of conditions which

FA
83
Box 1
Folder 1

are beyond the control of those attempting to secure its benefits.

Yes, education here is free for every person of school age in America, citizen or not. However, there are problems which must be dealt with before learning can take place. Many classrooms are noisy places not conducive to learning or to study. Adjusting to such classrooms involves the loss of the typical Asian respect for the teacher, and perhaps some loss of respect for elders in general. Problems of prejudice against anyone whose skin color or eye shape is different from the typical American student must be coped with. The presence of drugs and cigarettes in school is an unwelcome change from experience in Asia, where, I was told, a few people use drugs, but never school children or teachers. The spirit of cooperation has replaced that of competition in most American schools, and Asian student competence and willingness to study is often resented by those with lesser initiative and ability. Finally, course content has been so diluted in order that it be understood by every student in the classroom (including those who have been placed at that level not through ability but because of age, integration practices, or the mainstreaming of the mentally and physically impaired) that most persons of average or better ability find it necessary to motivate and educate themselves through outside activities.

It does seem that Asians are better able to thread their way through the problem areas listed above and come away with more benefits than the typical American student but, their

FA
83
Box 1
Folder 1

parents fear, at the cost of the loss of their Asian values.

The story narrated by Ponnaren Hak (Appendix A) provides a vivid illustration of some of these values. She explained that this story came from a book given to her by her mother when Naren was learning to read her native language, Khmer. The book contained several stories, all of them attempting to teach a moral or lesson. In the story of Suppee and Thunderstorm, we find respect for elders, politeness, gratitude, kindness, and helpfulness portrayed as important qualities to be cultivated; while rudeness, greed, and unkindness are deserving of the worst punishments imaginable: sickness, bad dreams, death, and "never seeing your parents again."

These values are a vital part of the lifestyle of the Southeast Asians, as exemplified by the manners of both young and older people with whom I talked. Parents are eager to have their children speak English, get an education, conform to American ways, and succeed in this alien country in which circumstances have forced them to reside. To obtain the best of both worlds is the goal of these Asians, these new Americans, in our midst.

FA
83
Box 1
Folder 1

APPENDIX A

This one of the girl was in town, named Suppee.
 And she's really nice, she's like Cinderella.
 Really nice, you know, PERFECT.
 And the other girl, probably her neighbor, her name is THUNDERSTORM.
 This is why we call her Thunderstorm, because she's really mean and wild.
 She's have no manner at all.
 She's totally opposite from Suppee, the nice girl.
 Suppee always respect her parents, come home on time, never lie to parents, make a lot of friends, help other people that were sick, or the elders, the old people.

One day, God let Thunderstorm dream bad things, because she's really mean, and they hate her, you know.
 Everybody around her hate her, can't stand her any more, because her attitude is so worse, it's BAD.
 So God let her dream like that, let her dream very bad dream.
 And then Thunderstorm want everything that Suppee have; she's really jealous, she try to take the good thing that Suppee have for herself.

Then one day Suppee went to the jungle.
 She makes a lot of friends with the animal, like the monkeys, the bird, the rabbits, a lot of friends.
 Even the TIGER, she makes friends with.
 It's like she's "Queen of the Jungle."
 Every animal in the jungle knew her and were really friendly to her.
 One day, Suppee went there to pick some fruit.
 Suppee got a lot of fruit because the monkey got on the tree and pick her the fruit, like orange and all the stuff she said she wanted, she couldn't get up there and pick.
 A lot of the animals, especially the monkey, would pick up there and just throw to her in the bag.
 She got a whole bunch of it.
 She said "Thank you" and then she'd go home, like daytime.

Thunderstorm never know that way.
 She never know the secret place that Suppee usually go there to have fun with her friends, animal friends.
 So Thunderstorm followed Suppee, and then Suppee would go home.
 Thunderstorm saw a lot of fruit falling, so she picked up those fruit.
 And she saw the trees, on the tree and everything, and she wants everything.
 It's like never enough for her.
 She want every bit of it.
 No matter how much it is, it's NEVER ENOUGH.

FA

83

Box 1

Folder 1

And she kept picking, picking, picking until it's almost dark.

She didn't even care about it. She's still picking the fruit, because she wants so much.

And then it's getting darker and darker, and she lost her way--home.

Which is, she never know that road, she just followed Suppee. She didn't really pay attention to the road, and she couldn't get back because she lost her way.

She's crying and everything.

She kept walking in the jungle.

Get her foot cut, on stuff in the grass, and then she'd walk a little bit.

And then she saw the OLD LADY.

The old lady doesn't have any children.

She's very jungle, like NOWHERE, she's in the middle of the wood by herself.

She have an old house, made from a piece of wood, which is almost broken apart.

And she say to herself, "That old lady have a lamp."

And Thunderstorm saw just a little bit of light, and she go straight up there and follow the light till she saw a house.

And she go "Knock, knock."

And the old lady said, "Who is this?"

Because she don't expect anybody, because it's like nowhere for her.

And she said "My name is Thunderstorm."

Then she said, "What do you want?"

She said, "May I have a house to rest tonight? I lost the way and I couldn't get back to my house, it's dark. Can I stay one night, until morning, I can find my house?"

Old lady said, "Okay. That's fine. You can stay tonight, I can help you out.

And Thunderstorm just stayed there, and in the morning she's not even say "Thank you" to the old lady, she's not even give a single fruit to her.

She's like, "Okay, I wake up," and she's wake up and everything, then just walk out of the house, not even say "Goodbye."

Which is, she's a really CRUDE, RUDE person!

So she got home, her mother asked her where she come from, she lost one night, because her parents really scared.

Thought she was in a pond somewhere, drowned.

Tried to find her, couldn't find her.

And she said, (SHE LIED TO HER PARENTS), she said,

"I nowhere. I just want to be in the jungle, relax myself, get some fresh air, and stuff," and lied, all kinds of things.

FA
83
Box 1
Folder 1

Her parents forgive her, because she is nine years old,
really young.
They were about the same age. [Suppee and Thunderstorm]

The next day, they were out, they walk on the road, the road-
way, it's like a sidewalk--
The sidewalk is on top, the ground is really high, the side
is really deep, if you fall off you go down a little bit--
It's scary.
It's like a mountain, like you're walking on a moun-
tain.

The old lady, she decided, that old lady, she come to town to
buy something.

She hold a lot of pieces of wood.
She's very old, she walks and she's shaking, she couldn't
talk very well.

You know how old people get. She's like that, she's in her
nineties or something like that, closer a hundred.

Thunderstorm saw her, and never said "Thank you" or "Good-
bye."

Old lady didn't say anything.

Not just that, she turned old lady down, like keep walking.
Suppee was walking after Thunderstorm, behind Thunderstorm,
but she doesn't know.

So Thunderstorm saw that old lady, she go over there behind
the old lady and push her out of the road, the sidewalk.
And the old lady fall, like everywhere.

It's really high, like mountain, and the old lady fall off
the sidewalk.

And Suppee go, "THUNDERSTORM, HOW COULD YOU DO SUCH A THING
LIKE THAT! SHE'S AN OLD LADY! YOU KNOW HOW OLD SHE
IS? SHE'S CLOSE TO A HUNDRED! LOOK HOW OLD SHE IS! SHE
COULD GET KILLED DOING THAT," she said all those.

And Thunderstorm says, "WHO CARES! It's none of your busi-
ness. I do what I want to do."

And Thunderstorm says "Pass."

And Suppee doesn't say anything, just stand and look at her
and shake her head, "She's weird."

Suppee is running down there and help the old lady up.

That night, when Thunderstorm goes to sleep, she dreams.
She was really sick when she got home.

God had enough of her. He tried to give her all kinds of
warning but it's no use.

God have it up to here. "I have enough of her," and run out
of patience with her.

God makes her really, really sick.

Which is like miracle, you know.

Made her really, really sick.

She got a bad fever. Her temperature was up to 100 or so.

More than 100. It's really high.

FA

83

Box 1

Folder 1

3-46

And she dream, she slept, called "Mom," called "Dad," talked weird things, because her temperature was very high. Could you imagine? When she got home she was sick.

At night she slept. She's dream a lot of bad things. She woke up. Her Mom was there. She dreamed that ghosts sit beside her and going to kill her, but actually, she woke up, it's her Mom. She goes back to sleep, and then she dreamed about a snake again.

A BIG snake!

The king snake, it's like the king snake, but it's brown colors, a real big snake that can go around and break your bone--

I don't know what it's called but it can wrap around you and broke your bone--

It's not a king snake but it's big like that.

She dreamed about the snake, come and get her and wrap around her neck, and said (It's like God),

"If you don't do good, and you don't respect, and you don't do what I say, then this snake going to break your neck right now, and you'll never, ever see your parent again."

It's a dream that's sort of real, at night, because she like, imagined it.

She woke up and she couldn't get it out, it was really like the snake was in her neck.

God talked to her, said "From now on, if you don't respect your parents, and you don't say 'Thank you' to all people and be polite like Suppee, then your life will be more miserable and people are going to hate you. They cannot stand your attitude.

"Actually, you are going to die SOON. You won't live any longer because you're the most cruel person in the whole town."

She kept setting against God, and finally God convinced her to, persuaded her to, and said, "If you don't do it, I'll kill you right now."

She said "Yes."

That night, before that, she dreamed that the old lady gave her some noodle to eat.

That noodle, it's not in a bowl, it's in a basket, a big basket.

When she eat, she see it, it's like snake, a little snake, all OVER the basket.

After she eat a spoon of it, she saw the snake everywhere. She said, "SNAKE is in my stomach. I saw this big thing in my stomach."

She grossed out and everything. She's run home.

That's how she dreamed about it.

She stopped that dream. She dreamed another one about God really come and talked to her, about the snake, the big snake that wrapped around her neck.

Then finally she give up, and she said, "I agree to turn to be a good person, like Suppee. I try as good as her. From now on I will respect my parents, and respect my friends, help all the peoples, do good things to the world. If they need me to, I do the best to help." In the morning, she served her Mom and her Dad the coffees, and respect her, and from that day on she's learned to be a good person like Suppee."

Naren's tale is obviously didactic, but there is a fascinating inclusion of folktale motifs in this lesson in behavior. Warren Roberts's study of Tale Type AA-Th 480, The Tale of the Kind and the Unkind Girls (6), provides information about one Indochinese version in Contes et Legendes Annamites (7). I found the following correlations:

<u>Contes et Legendes</u>	<u>Naren's Tale</u>
I A 2 sisters	two girls
II A 24 heroine goes out to gather food	heroine goes out to pick fruit
V F general politeness	politeness
VII A 8 punishments: death	punishments: threat of death
VII B 2 snakes in basket	dream of snakes in basket

In European versions of "Kind and Unkind Girls" I also found these similar motifs: heroine helped by animals, encounter with a fruit tree, meeting an old woman, house in a wood, helping an old person out of a ditch, rudeness "rewarded" by a container of snakes.

This correlation is a concept I would like to have explored further if more tales had been narrated.

FA
83
Box 1
Folder 1

APPENDIX B

This is Naren's translation of "a song, but not really a song" which she and the other children had to memorize and sing in school in the Thailand refugee camp.

When I came to the camp, I had no friends.

I was poor, I was skinny.

I was like my skin is to my bone, I don't have meat.

I was really poor, a poor Thaiander.

Now I have many friends.

The teacher helped me.

A lot of people brought me food.

I will never forget to be thankful.

FA
83
Box 1
Folder 1

Interviews:

- Bell, Suzanne. Bowling Green, KY. 14 April 1989.
- Chak, John. Bowling Green, KY. 5 April 1989.
- Chak, Ye. Bowling Green, KY. 23 March 1989.
- Chau, Yong. Bowling Green, KY. 17 April 1989.
- Detthaxay, Chanphalangsy. Bowling Green, KY. 25 February 1989.
- Hak, Ponnaren. Bowling Green, KY. 15 April 1989.
- Mounn, Chear. Bowling Green, Ky. 23 March 1989.
- Sananikone, Pane. Bowling Green, KY. 25 February 1989.
- Vang, My. Bowling Green, KY. 23 March 1989.

Notes:

1. For Thourn Sun's description of treatment by Communist Khmer Rouge, see John Hart, "Refugee moves on but hasn't forgotten." 5 February 1985 WKU Herald 60:1,2.
2. Tek Lang tells about Communist indoctrination in "Killing Fields: Movie Mirrors Lives of Cambodian Refugees in Bowling Green." 24 March 1985 Park City Daily News.
3. Sheila Conway describes this process in "Breaking language barriers for Indochinese refugees." 21 September 1980 Bowling Green Daily News.
4. Job placement is explained in "Federal Government Ends Funding for Refugee Job Training Program." 10 July 1981 Park City Daily News.
5. Teng Loy exemplifies Asian concern for education in Donna-Lin Stringer, "Cambodian family finds haven from

FA
83
Box 1
Folder 1

their war-torn homeland." 21 February 1989 Bowling Green
Daily News.

- 6. See pp. 60, 88, 99, 123-4, 126 in Warren Roberts, The Tale of the Kind and the Unkind Girls. Berlin: Walter de Gruyter, 1958.
- 7. No. 72 in A. Landes, Contes et Legendes Annamites. Saigon: 1886.

FA
83
Box 1
Folder 1