

# anthro notes

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## THROUGH FOREIGN EYES: INDOCHINESE REFUGEES IN AMERICA

Since 1975, about 700,000 refugees from the countries of former French Indochina have come to the United States, settling in urban and rural communities across the country. Many Americans think of the Indochinese as one homogenous group with a distinct culture very different from our own. Actually, the Indochinese represent three nationalities and at least five major ethnic groups: Khmer, Lao, Vietnamese, Hmong, and Chinese. Each group's culture, language, and politics is unique and political barriers and considerations of rank and status prevent much mixing.

Unlike migrants, refugees live in exile from their homeland and feel they can never return. Many have left family behind. In addition to the comprehensive economic, cultural, psychological, and social adjustments required of all immigrants, Indochinese refugees face particular difficulty since almost no established Indochinese communities existed in America prior to their arrival. Many refugees do not know what to expect from American life or how best to adapt. Yet many of the Indochinese refugees have fairly quickly become successful students, employees, and entrepreneurs. Much of their success probably can be explained

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the American way of life, particularly the American credit system. In Vietnam you are more reliable and more respectable if you owe no money. Here in America you are encouraged to go into debt; the more credit cards you hold, the more trusted a client you become. If you don't restrain yourself, you can owe thousands of dollars to a company overnight; and, if you cannot make the ends meet, you also can be dispossessed overnight!

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by their resiliency and the values they brought with them as well as by the aid made available from public and private agencies.

The following four commentaries, two written by Indochinese and two by anthropologists, give some insight into the refugees' response to American culture. Le-the Bai, Vice President of the American Vietnamese Buddhist Association, and Vilay Chaleunrath, Director of the Indo-Chinese Community Center, give an Indochinese perspective on some of the problems the refugees encounter. Beatrice Hackett, who participated in the Washington Association of Professional Anthropologists Service Project involving Indochinese refugee resettlement, shares her observations about Indochinese frustrations and rewards when adjusting to a new and different life in America. David Haines, formerly with the Office of Refugee Resettlement, discusses the anthropologist's role in helping not only the refugees in their resettlement but also Americans' perceptions of these newcomers.

#### CULTURAL CONFLICTS

America is a "melting pot" holding many different cultures--or, at its best, it is a salad bowl holding many different ingredients...

When the Vietnamese first arrived in America, they were very skeptical of

To newcomers, it is a real culture shock to witness Americans sending their ailing elders to establishments which provide lodging, meals, and some nursing care instead of taking them in, as Vietnamese more often do, and caring for them until they die. Vietnamese feel deeply affected by adversities occurring to relatives as if they were their own problems. Members of a family are like fingers of a hand--if one digit is hurt or cut, the whole hand will feel the pain.

Contrary to the expected goal in America of achieving personal independence (which many Vietnamese do admire), the Vietnamese emphasize obedience to the wishes of elders and acceptance of responsibilities and obligations toward family and relatives. This extends to looking after ailing elders and being responsible for the care of siblings. The woman's role can be expressed in the three golden rules: 1) to follow her father when she is young; 2) to follow her husband when she is married; and 3) to follow her eldest son when she is a widow. As a rule, women from respectable Vietnamese families cannot divorce and remarry.

Many Vietnamese men have not had the good fortune of finding work in the United States. In many cases their wives have become the breadwinners. Often the husband feels tormented by this reversal of roles and feels a loss of self-esteem in the eyes of his children. For others, the adjustment is more rapid and opportunities here,



regardless of sex, race, or religion, are appreciated and assist in maintaining traditional Vietnamese qualities known as the four virtues:

1) to be able to work; 2) to keep a clean and respectable image; 3) to speak justly and sweetly; and 4) to have a good manner.

America, the "melting pot," allows different cultural expressions but also presents cultural conflicts that we, as Vietnamese, must face living in this new land.

Le-the Bai

#### AMERICA LAND OF PLENTY

In order to understand refugee resettlement problems in this country, one has to be familiar with the background of the two waves of Indochinese migrations. The first wave of migration in 1975-1977 were people connected with the old government and the military as well as those who either worked for or were closely associated with American and other western diplomatic missions in Indochina. Some of these people were educated in the West, had professions, and understood and spoke sufficient English. They were sophisticated enough to cope with the Western way of life. The refugees from the second wave of migration, since 1978, are more often illiterate and many are single persons. Most had no familiarity with Western culture, and they experienced difficulty adjusting to a culture which was very new and strange to them.

Many of the recent Indochinese refugees arrived in America with high expectations and often misleading information they received in the resettlement camps. Everyone expected to have a new car, a beautiful home, good clothes, and to be taken care of by the "church." In reality, many overqualified refugees had to accept menial jobs, creating a serious loss of self-respect. Low cost housing has

been very limited, forcing families to share living quarters, sometimes with as many as ten persons crowded into a two-bedroom apartment. These sudden and complete changes in ways of life have caused mental distress, depression, and homesickness in some people, which is likely to be with them for a long time.

Another important resettlement problem, which Indochinese refugees have made efforts to accept, is the decline in their cultural values. Traditional family ties slowly have been breaking down. Older children can no longer support and care for their aged parents, and youngsters are learning new ways in school. Many are becoming Americanized, taking on new social values, hair styles, and eating habits.

The value of large families, which ensures economic and emotional security and a family line of succession, is diminishing as many refugees face economic depression and hardship. Often husband-wife relationships become strained as wives begin to demand more rights once they are working and earning incomes as housekeepers, waitresses, and office clerks.

But, despite the many problems faced by Indochinese refugees, they are making a great effort in their acculturation as many have become regular wage earners, and some even store and restaurant owners.

Vilay Chaleunrath

#### WHAT PRICE FREEDOM?

Many different groups of Indochinese have settled in the Washington, D.C., metropolitan area: Vietnamese from urban areas, most of whom are Catholic; Lao from rural areas who are Buddhist; Khmer from both urban and rural Cambodia who are also

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Buddhist; and Chinese Cambodians, many of whom converted to Christianity in the refugee camps. Anthropologists are working directly with these refugees in programs focusing on family and social services, mental health, English language and culture training, and job counseling.

Many of these refugees have learned to make major compensations and adjustments as new residents of the United States. Some aspects of American life are deeply disturbing, particularly those which touch most closely the basic social structures and values of the new immigrants. Rural people living in city apartments long for land to farm. Tiny garden plots for planting mint and eggplant must suffice. For former entrepreneurs, banking procedures for borrowing money to start a business, and state and federal tax requirements seem burdensome and intrusive. In the refugees' former societies, businesses are financed by family savings, and earnings are not always counted on a purely cash basis. Furthermore, earnings are a private matter within the family domain. For Indochinese women, male obstetricians and gynecologists cause dismay for childbirth is the business of women and birth a home event watched over by an attending midwife, with mother and sisters close by to provide comfort.

But, ask any Indochinese refugee what he or she likes most about America and chances are the answer will be "freedom." Being free includes not only political freedom but perceived economic opportunity and its symbols--an apartment, a television, perhaps a car, a better job, saved money for one's own business, and unrestricted travel around the country to visit or join relatives and friends.

On Saturday mornings, Indochinese refugees gather at the many grocery-restaurants which have emerged

as social centers. Friends meet and exchange information, buy familiar foods and other commodities, eat traditional foods too difficult for small families to prepare at home, converse with relatives and friends in a familiar language, and in general enjoy the leisure of the day.

We are a nation of immigrants and adaptation takes time, but it is happening once again in our generation.

Beatrice Hackett

#### ROLE OF THE ANTHROPOLOGIST

Anthropology has always been concerned with the understanding of, direct experience with, and ability to explain cultural differences. Anthropologists typically point out that particular American assumptions about the nature of society are often a poor guide to other cultures. Predictably, anthropologists have attempted to sketch some of the details of culture and society among Indochinese refugees: the way Vietnamese look at jobs, the nature of clans and family alliance among the Hmong, patron-client networks among the Lao, and conflict between Vietnamese and American views of how to fish off the California coast. Anthropologists thus perform their traditional role of challenging ill-examined and over-generalized assumptions about people, opening a window onto a more culturally sensitive and diverse view of others.

The initial anthropological effort has often taken the form of emphasizing polar distinctions such as the American nuclear family versus the Asian extended family; Western individualism versus Eastern emphasis on the individual's immersion in the social group; the role of the unappreciated American teacher versus the great honor attached to the teacher in Southeast Asia; and the independence of the American wife versus the submissiveness



of the wife in Southeast Asia. Such distinctions are useful, but they do not apply generally to all Southeast Asian refugees. The patrilineal, extended structure of Vietnamese and Hmong kinship is counterpoised to a far more bilateral pattern among the Khmer and Lao. The notion of the subordinate role of the Asian wife is challenged by the long established autonomy of Vietnamese women, particularly in the public economic domain. The anthropologist is thus necessarily at the forefront of the unending task of greater specification among diverse ethnic groups. The increasing public acceptance of a five-fold categorization among Indochinese refugees of Khmer, Lao, Hmong, Vietnamese, and Chinese is an important step forward.

One difficult aspect of the anthropologist's efforts is the necessity to understand the situation of refugees, the kinds of cultural and social resources they bring with them, and the kinds of difficulties they face and usually overcome--all within the context of an exceedingly complex governmental assistance program. The attention the refugee program receives at the national, state, and local levels ensures that the national dialogue about refugees is conditioned as much by political goals and perceptions of American society as by the realities of the refugees' situation. Current discussions about refugee "dependency" and refugee "impact," for example, reflect far more the internal workings of American government than they do the adjustment of refugees to the United States and the actual effects they have on the communities in which they settle.

The anthropologist, then, in attempting to work with the refugees and understand and explain their situation, must distinguish among issues that relate to refugees, those that relate to the interaction of refugees with American society, and those that relate more directly to the

complexity of the refugee aid program. That complexity, in fact, provides a challenge to the anthropologist that rivals that entailed by the cultural and social complexity of the various Indochinese refugee groups.

David Haines

