

Identity and Transition

CREATING THE REFUGEE FLOW

In April 1975, after six months of intensive air bombardment by the United States Air Force and a prolonged, bitter battle with the American-backed Lon Nol government, the Communist Khmer Rouge, led by Pol Pot, defeated its rival and triumphantly entered Phnom Penh, Cambodia's capital. In the following weeks, all those living in the city and in Khmer provincial centers were forced from their homes (Shawcross 1979:365–67). Black-clad soldiers brandishing revolvers and AK-47s ordered the city's inhabitants to pack their belongings and leave for the countryside, saying they would be allowed to return in several weeks. Families bundled up clothing, cookware, medicine, and sacks of rice. They hastily hid gold, jewelry, family heirlooms, and other valuables. Although there was much speculation, no one knew for certain why they were being evacuated.

Initially, some Khmer welcomed the arrival of the Khmer Rouge, hoping that the new government would avoid the excesses of the former regime (Chandler 1991:250). It soon became clear, however, that anyone even distantly associated with the American-backed Lon Nol government or identified as a member of the Khmer intelligentsia was in extreme danger. Many were executed, often after enduring horrific brutality. Some families decided to split up to increase their individual chances of survival. Others were forced apart in the chaos of the evacuation.

[Female, age 42] At that time, I was twenty-two or twenty-three. I was a student at the University of Science in Phnom Penh. My family lived in the south of Phnom Penh in Toul Tumpoung. So I lived with my sister and her husband near Töek Laâk, because it was closer to my school. When the Khmer Rouge took over the city in 1975, I had to go with my sister's family to leave the city. We didn't know where the rest of the family had gone. My sister's husband had been a police officer under Lon Nol, so he decided to separate from us because

he said, "If I stay with you, a lot of people know me and they will kill all of us."

So during the Communist regime, I only had my sister. We went first to Takeo, and then later the Khmer Rouge sent us to Battambang [in the northwest]. In Battambang, they were killing all the intellectuals and *nĕak mean* (middle-class), so we pretended we could not read or write. We were lucky because we knew how to sew. We survived because we sewed the uniforms for the soldiers.

In the new "Democratic" Kampuchea, all means of production were to be collectivized and class distinctions eliminated. In fact, however, the Khmer Rouge replaced traditional categories of class and status with a plethora of new, equally value-laden sociopolitical distinctions. The most basic of these was the opposition between "base people," who were poor and lower-middle-class peasants, and "new people," who were individuals (most of them urban) "liberated as of 1975" (Ebihara 1987:25). Under the Khmer Rouge, base people generally received better treatment. New people had far fewer rights.

Pol Pot reportedly boasted at one point that his goal was to make Cambodia "one big work camp" (Ablin and Hood 1987:xxxv). Consistent with this vision, the new government moved quickly to establish labor camps throughout the countryside. Cadres organized families into "production teams" and larger cooperatives. Adolescents were assigned to single-sex work teams. Even little children and old people were put to work.

Young people were separated from their parents in an effort to supplant familial bonds with allegiance to the revolutionary state. Work teams lived and slept together, and meals were eaten communally. Schools were closed, and religion was suppressed. Perhaps most horrifying to Khmer elders, children were indoctrinated with revolutionary rhetoric and encouraged to turn in family members to the "organization" (*ĕngkĕăă*) if they exhibited antirevolutionary attitudes.

Even language was made to conform to the new revolutionary ideology. Traditional terms of deference to elders or those of higher status were replaced with status-neutral terms. Terms for mother (*mae*) and father (*ĕv*) were to be preceded by or replaced with the term for friend (*mĭt*).

Those who resisted the new order and those who were suspected

of harboring antirevolutionary sentiments were imprisoned, tortured, or executed.

[Female, age 33] During Pol Pot time, I had no family with me, and I lived with a woman from the city. She was the head of our group, and I was like her younger sister. I washed her clothes and helped her when she was pregnant. Then, they took her away to kill her. The Khmer Rouge accused her of being a CIA spy. They took me, too, and locked me in a room. I just prayed and prayed. And then one Khmer Rouge came in and said, "You are lucky. They won't kill you."

Within the Khmer Rouge, particularly in the first months of the revolutionary government, there were, in fact, a number of factions.¹ Conditions varied widely among different regions in the countryside, depending on which faction was dominant. In 1977, in the eastern province of Prey Veng, a coup was attempted against Pol Pot, who was euphemistically referred to as "Brother Number One." This uprising was followed in 1978 by another in the Eastern Zone adjacent to Vietnam, led by old-guard Communists opposed to the draconian policies of the revolutionary regime. Despite bitter resistance, however, Pol Pot emerged from both rebellions as the victor and moved swiftly and ruthlessly to eliminate his rivals and consolidate his power (Ablin and Hood 1987:xxxv; see also Kiernan 1986). During the same two-year period, the party and the country as a whole were ravaged by purges, torture, and mass executions. Few escaped the violence.

[Male, age 45] From the beginning, the Khmer Rouge suspected me of being a Lon Nol soldier. But they had no proof, and I had no family they could use to turn against me. They were watching me closely for a long time. In the spring of 1978, they took me and held me in a group of prisoners for about one month. I wasn't really in a jail at that time. They even fed me rice every day. The soldiers joked with me and called me by my name.

But after one month, late one night at like 12:00 midnight, a jeep came to pick me up. They took me to K'dal [southwest of Phnom Penh] and asked me again, "Were you a soldier with Lon Nol? Don't lie to me, or I will kill you!" I told them, "Never. I worked at an import-export company. I was just a regular worker, carrying, unloading. If I was a soldier for Lon Nol, I would kill myself!" I just said it like that. They took two chains and said, "Kneel down with your hands behind your back!" and they chained my hands. They

put another chain around my neck and attached the two. The leader of the Khmer Rouge put my head between his feet and squeezed my neck against the chain, saying, "I will kill you if you don't tell me the truth!" He kept squeezing like that. I said, "I never worked for Lon Nol!"

Finally, they put me in a truck and took me to Wat Ay Phnom [a large Buddhist temple that had been converted into a torture center and jail]. They chained me to about twenty people. I lived six months like that. And every day I saw them kill maybe ten or twenty people. Before they kill you, they torture you and keep asking, "Were you a soldier or a professor before? What did you do?" Before they kill you, they make you run across a bridge, and when you get to the other side, they kill you. They just say, "Run!" and on the other side there are soldiers and they hit you with an ax and you fall into a ditch. I saw one man who was hit, and he fell into that hole, and they started to fill the hole with dirt even though the man was still alive and trying to climb out. I saw that because they made me collect firewood in that area. They wanted me to see that killing so I would be afraid and confess.

Finally, in December 1978, in response to continued border skirmishes with the Khmer Rouge, the Vietnamese invaded Cambodia. As the Vietnamese advanced, conditions in the work camps worsened (Chandler 1991:311). Camp cadres feared that, once freed from bondage, their charges would turn against them. Killings in the camps increased, with prisoners being executed for the smallest infraction. Anticipating the arrival of the Vietnamese, the captors forced starving workers to stockpile huge supplies of rice and water in mountain hideouts while their own daily rations were reduced to watery rice gruel or a handful of parched corn (Szymusiak 1986:177–210; Martin 1994:189).

In the prisons, as in the work camps, already unbearable conditions took a turn for the worse.

[Male, age 51] When I first went into prison, I saw there were maybe three hundred people in that place. The guards would kill only two or three people a day; the others, they tortured so that they wanted to die. Those people would scream, "Just kill me, I want to die!" They tortured me like that, too—every week, the same method. They would tie a plastic bag around my neck until I passed out. It was so terrible, it felt like my head was bursting, like I was dying. I would lose consciousness and fall onto the floor. Then they would revive me by throwing water in my face! It was like that for more than two years.

By that time, there were only maybe ten or twenty of us left. I was sure that I would be the next one to die. I was so thin, so very thin. I didn't care anymore; I wanted to die. They gave us only rice soup one time a day. Watery *bâbââ*. Once a day, one small bowl with a few grains of rice. I was so weak, I couldn't walk. I couldn't even lift my chains up to go to the bathroom. I just lay there in that filth. I was too weak to do anything.

Although Cambodians have historically viewed Vietnamese with considerable antipathy, those in the labor camps and prisons understandably welcomed the Vietnamese advance. By January 1979, Vietnamese troops had "liberated" major areas of the countryside (Chandler 1991:310).

I remember sometime after New Year's Day 1979, I heard noises like gunfire and the guards yelling, "We have to run! It's the Vietnamese!" After that, I heard a lot of gunfire. I had a friend in prison with me, a Chinese man. He told me to get up, maybe the Vietnamese will rescue us. We both tried to stand up, but we were so weak, we kept falling down. Then I heard a noise, someone banging through the door, through the wall, and suddenly I saw a lot of Vietnamese soldiers, maybe thirty. They had machine guns and they were shooting at all of the guards and the guards were trying to get away. The Vietnamese had a lot of keys, and they used them to take off our handcuffs. And the Vietnamese doctor gave us injections, all six of us. They gave us coconut milk, too, but we were still too weak to walk. They had to carry us in cots to the hospital in downtown Battambang. By that time, there were only six of us left out of three hundred.

Some estimate that under the Khmer Rouge, more than one million people died (Banister and Johnson 1993:67). Others place the number significantly higher (see Knoll 1982; Kiernan 1990). Those who were not killed outright were slowly starved or worked to death. Others died from disease and a lack of medical care. Many others simply "disappeared" into the forest and were never seen again.

The survivors, once freed from the Khmer Rouge, were anxious to locate family and friends, so they returned to their homes in large numbers. During the chaotic months of fighting between various rebel factions and the Vietnamese-backed government forces and during the ensuing population movement, no crops were planted. Severe food shortages occurred throughout Cambodia in the spring and summer (Chandler 1991:313; Banister and Johnson 1993:74).

In the months following the Vietnamese invasion, some six hundred thousand Cambodians fled to the Thai border (Ebihara 1985:133–34). They left their country for a variety of reasons. Many were starving and had returned to their homes and fields only to find everything in ruins. Others hoped to escape the continued fighting. Many strongly distrusted the new People’s Republic of Kampuchea supported by the Vietnamese. Although large numbers succeeded in fleeing to Thailand, the journey was not easy. Typically, they escaped only by walking over mountains, passing through jungles and minefields with very little to eat or drink.

[Male, age 57] When the Vietnamese entered my country, I was living in Battambang province and I was very sick. I couldn’t walk at all, my legs were so swollen—big like this. If I walked even two meters, I got very tired. I said to myself, I have to go west to Thailand, to escape, but my energy, my strength, I had none. Suddenly, I don’t know where it came from—it was like a miracle. I could walk like five miles and not get tired! I faced many obstacles. I was stopped by a soldier, and he told me I had to go back. But I just kept walking. That soldier shot at me, at my back, but I started running and running and his bullets didn’t hit me. I was very afraid, but I kept running. Finally, after days and days of walking, I made it to the border of Thailand.

The Thai, however, were reluctant to accept massive numbers of destitute Khmer. In a gesture that horrified Western observers, in the spring of 1979, Thai soldiers forced forty thousand refugees back into Cambodia by pushing them down into a remote ravine filled with land mines (Ebihara 1985:134; Ablin and Hood 1987:xliv). Those not killed by the mines or shot by Vietnamese soldiers faced starvation. Only after a number of Western countries, notably the United States, France, and Australia, agreed to ensure that Thailand would not be left with a permanent refugee population did Thailand relent and announce that it would not forcibly repatriate any more Khmer.

In the fall of 1979, refugee camps for the Cambodians were set up on the border under the auspices of the United Nations High Commission for Refugees (Ablin and Hood 1987:xliv). Although the situation gradually improved, life on the Thai border was still desperate and uncertain. Border settlements could not escape the continuing Khmer civil war; they were the repeated targets of raids and bombing attacks. Lacking established social order, some of the settlements

came to be run by paramilitary thugs; residents were routinely subjected to rape, robbery, and extortion (French 1994:24–25). Refugees waited in these uncertain conditions for months, even years, hoping to eventually be resettled in a “third country.”

These experiences have exacted a high toll on individual Khmer. As a result of their years under the Khmer Rouge, the horrors of their escape, and the desperation of their lives on the Thai border, many still struggle with serious depression and physical disabilities. The vast majority lost friends and family members to starvation, illness, or murder. Many personally witnessed torture, rape, and killings.

Years later, a young Khmer American woman linked such events to her mother’s reticence to venture out of her East Boston apartment and her inability to “concentrate” enough to study English:

[Female, age 23] When my mother saw my father killed by the Khmer Rouge, when she saw him taken away with his arms tied behind his back, she went crazy. At that time I was eleven. My little sister was only three days old. Somehow, my father knew he was going to be taken away. Someone must have told him, and he managed to come to the family about 12:00 one night to see us.

We were all crying together, but I didn’t really understand what was going on. He touched my head and said, “Ratha, you are the one who will have to take care of the family” (because, although you wouldn’t believe it now, my older sister was very sick at that time and couldn’t do anything). “Wherever you go in the future, after I am gone from this earth, get an education. Study hard for your future.” I will always remember that, what he said to me that night.

A few days later, when the Khmer Rouge took him and tied him up, I begged them, “Please don’t kill my father. He didn’t do anything wrong.” The leader told me, “If you want to die, just go stand over there [with him]!” But another soldier led me away to my family.

After they killed him, they cut his liver out and showed that to my mother. They said that was the “bad liver” (*prâmăt kmav*) and whoever cried for my father would be killed. But at night my mother cried and cried until her skin got really dark and her heart stopped. She still cries now, and she forgets a lot of things because of the shock of seeing that.

Many young Khmer like Ratha are burdened with the memories of death and stagger under the weight of responsibilities that loved ones conferred on them in their final moments. Strangers in a strange land, many Khmer live with haunting recollections of brutality and

degradation and have no choice but to try to rebuild their worlds from shattered lives.

PATTERNS OF MIGRATION

Since 1979, an estimated 250,000 Cambodians have resettled abroad (Ablin and Hood 1987:xliv). Some 152,000 were accepted for resettlement by the United States (Banister and Johnson 1993:70). Refugees from Southeast Asia arrived in this country in what are commonly described in the literature as three "waves," or cohorts (Ebihara 1985:134).

Cambodians were underrepresented in the first and second migratory waves. In 1975, the year both Saigon and Phnom Penh fell to Communist forces, only 4,600 Cambodians came to the United States, as compared with 125,000 Vietnamese (Gordon 1987:156).² The number of Khmer refugees decreased significantly in the following two years. The second wave of Southeast Asians began to enter the country in late 1978 (Strand and Jones 1985:34). In this wave, many of the boat people of Vietnam, as well as Hmong, Mien, and Lao, began to arrive in the United States. For the first time, too, a significant number of Cambodians—perhaps 10,000 in all—joined the ranks of Southeast Asian refugees arriving in the United States.

Beginning in January 1980, the third wave of refugee migration brought the largest influx of Khmer to the United States. This final migratory wave was made possible by the passage of the Refugee Act of 1980. This legislation allowed for the resettlement of 50,000 refugees in the United States each year through 1983. It also gave the president power to increase that number after consulting with Congress. President Jimmy Carter exercised that prerogative in 1980 to allow some 166,700 Southeast Asian refugees to resettle in the United States; among them were 16,000 Khmer refugees and a larger number of Hmong (Knoll 1982:141; Gordon 1987:155–56). Between 1980 and 1982, more than 60,000 Khmer entered the United States (Ebihara 1985:135). Significant numbers of Khmer continued to enter the country over the next several years.

These varied cycles of Southeast Asian immigration correlate with what are, in fact, substantial differences of culture and socioeconomic standing among immigrant Vietnamese, Lao, Khmer, and Sino-Vietnamese. In general, the first refugees were more urban and

better educated, whereas later arrivals tended to come from rural and less-educated backgrounds (Strand and Jones 1985:35; Kelly 1986:41). Indeed, many of the earliest arrivals were well educated even by American standards (Kelly 1986:43). Many of the Cambodians who came in this first, small group had worked for the U.S. government or had been otherwise involved in the Cambodian war effort (Ebihara 1985:135).

During these first years, the U.S. government's official resettlement policy was to disperse Southeast Asian refugees throughout the country. This was ostensibly done to avoid creating large, "unassimilable" enclaves. Under this policy, every state except Alaska received at least a hundred refugees; moreover, they were to be placed in small groups rather than in concentrated settlements across the fifty states (Baker and North 1984:55, cited in Gordon 1987:163). Ultimately, however, this policy was undermined by the large numbers of immigrants who simply decided on their own to move to communities of their choice. They fled in particularly large numbers from more isolated areas and uncomfortable climates and resettled in states such as California and Texas, where many had friends and family members. Schools and social services in these states were soon overburdened.

Later resettlement policies recognized living in concentrated ethnic communities would help refugees adapt socially and psychologically. In the face of the large influx of Khmer refugees in the early 1980s, the Office of Refugee Resettlement designated twelve "cluster communities" for Khmer resettlement. Groups of between 300 and 1,200 Khmer were placed in Atlanta, Boston, Chicago, Cincinnati, Columbus, Dallas, Houston, Jacksonville, New York City, Phoenix, Richmond, and Rochester (Refugee Resource Center 1981-82; Ebihara 1985:135; Gordon 1987:164). These communities were chosen because they had employment opportunities and available housing and were not already overburdened with large refugee populations. Boston had the added attraction of good public transportation and an established Chinatown with ethnic stores and services. The city also has a long history of accepting new immigrant populations.

By the late 1980s, Boston's Suffolk County had an estimated 5,362 Khmer (MORI 1988). In the 1988-89 school year, there were more than 450 Khmer-speaking children in the city's public school system (MDE 1988; Smith-Hefner 1990a:252). In the early 1990s, in the face

of Boston's escalating rental and real estate prices, the Khmer population in Boston proper began to decrease as families began to look for less expensive housing in areas just outside the city. During this same period, the nearby cities of Lynn, Lowell, and Revere experienced a significant increase in the number of Khmer children in their schools. By 1990, the last of the Thai border camps were closing, and the number of new Khmer immigrants allowed into the United States had slowed to a trickle. However, continued *in-migration*, the movement of Cambodians from one place to another within the state, as well as *secondary migration*, the movement of refugees initially settled in one state to another, had resulted in a growing concentration of Khmer in the Merrimack Valley region of Massachusetts, just north of metropolitan Boston (MORI 1988).

Khmer were drawn to the Northeast initially because of employment opportunities in plants that assembled electronics, computers, and medical supplies. Others came to be united with friends and family. Although some Khmer left the state during the five-year economic downturn that shook the Northeast from 1987 to 1992, the sheer size and vitality of the Khmer community served as a magnet for continuing migration.

At its height in the late 1980s, the Khmer population in eastern Massachusetts reached somewhere between 18,000 and 25,000 individuals, according to newspaper accounts.³ Today, the city of Lowell, one hour north of Boston, is said to have the second largest Khmer population in the United States after Long Beach, California. Lowell community leaders estimate that their city has between 12,000 and 15,000 Khmer. The 1990 U.S. census, however, only shows some 6,000 Cambodians living in Lowell (but this number is based on reported home language and does not include children under the age of five).⁴ The actual number probably lies somewhere between these figures. Boston's Khmer population has stabilized at around 1,500, whereas Lynn's population is now closer to 2,500, with 1,000 Khmer in nearby Revere and another 500 in Chelsea.⁵

Boston Khmer benefit from the social contacts and services in these adjacent Khmer communities. Many, for example, attend the Cambodian Buddhist temple in nearby Lynn. At the same time, Khmer from Lynn, Chelsea, Revere, and even Lowell hold their weddings in Boston's Chinatown, and many patronize Chinatown businesses. There is thus considerable interaction among these communities.

KHMER IN GREATER METROPOLITAN BOSTON

As members of the third and most recent wave of Southeast Asian migrants to the United States, the great majority of Khmer in greater metropolitan Boston share a rural background. Many have received less than a primary school education; indeed, the majority of rural Khmer women over the age of forty in the Boston area were illiterate in their native language at the time of their arrival (Smith-Hefner 1990a:255). Compared with the Khmer who settled in other areas of the United States and in Western Europe, relatively few middle-class Khmer have settled in eastern Massachusetts. Most of the Khmer intelligentsia and business class were murdered by the Khmer Rouge. Those who survived have preferred to emigrate to France, California, New York, or Washington, D.C. (particularly the suburb of Silver Spring, Maryland), where they have family members or military and business contacts. As with Khmer populations elsewhere, however, the Boston area Khmer population includes a disproportionate number of widows and young children and relatively few elderly. The class composition of Boston area Khmer has had an important influence on community developments. These Khmer generally lack the social and financial resources that are available in some other Khmer American communities. Perhaps most important, they have suffered from a dearth of politically and economically successful role models in the early years of resettlement.

Although it is possible to find streets or apartment complexes that are completely inhabited by Khmer, Cambodians in eastern Massachusetts typically live in dispersed settlements among other immigrant or minority populations. Most Khmer spend a good deal of time in mainstream, working-class American society, where they work, shop, and attend school. The Khmer community's social relationships are thus best characterized as increasingly "centrifugal," or tending outward. This centrifugal nature of Khmer social life is especially characteristic of certain categories of Khmer, most notably school-aged youth, many of whom spend few of their daytime hours in integral Khmer communities. As a result, and perhaps not surprisingly, it is Khmer youth who experience the greatest challenges in the reestablishment and adaptation of Khmer culture to life in the United States.

Khmer parents came to the United States with values and expectations shaped by their experiences of growing up in their own coun-

try, or, in the case of young adults, by the values they learned from their parents. This is true even though most Khmer refugees led atypical lives for many years, first under Pol Pot and then in the refugee camps. These more recent experiences inevitably affected Khmer ideas and Khmer worldview; however, many older refugees make strenuous efforts to differentiate such experiences from what is “truly Khmer.”

This process of sorting out and redefining what is authentic or valuable from the past and what can be set aside while re-creating an identity in an American context has been an important part of the experience of all American immigrant groups. For Khmer, of course, this process of accommodation is not simply a matter of choosing between timeless “tradition” and American “modernity.” In fact, some of the changes Khmer Americans are undergoing are continuations of processes of modern social change begun in Southeast Asia.⁶

If those changes began in Cambodia, however, they have certainly intensified here (Caplan, Whitmore, and Choy 1989:20). Other such changes—most notably, the challenge of maintaining a distinct minority identity in a culturally dominant mainstream society—are new for Khmer. Whatever their source, these changes are the subject of endless and sometimes impassioned debate among Khmer Americans. Some of the most vexing debates involve issues of identity, morality, and the upbringing of children.

IDENTITY AND CULTURAL TRANSMISSION

Cultural and historical accounts of Khmer by May Ebihara (1968, 1985) and others (Leclère [1899] 1975; Porée and Maspero 1938; LeBar, Hickey, and Musgrave 1964; Keyes 1977; Mabbett and Chandler 1995) provide us with a clear sense of the characteristics that distinguish Khmer from other Southeast Asian groups. Unlike Vietnamese, Sino-Vietnamese, and Hmong (but similar to Lao), Khmer have sociocultural roots that show the stronger influence of Indian rather than Chinese civilization. (The only exception to this generalization is in commerce, in which Chinese cultural influence is extensive.) Unlike the Chinese or Vietnamese, Khmer lack any kind of unilineal descent groups. Instead, as in many other Southeast Asian (and, for that matter, Western European) cultures, family structure is loosely neolocal, cognatic (“bilateral”),⁷ and focused on the nuclear family. By many ac-

counts, too, Khmer are more individualistic than collective when compared with some of their neighbors, especially those influenced by Chinese tradition. Behavior among kin is less rigidly prescribed and more dependent on individual likes and dislikes.

The overwhelming majority of Khmer are Theravada Buddhists, and the Buddhist doctrine of karma (*kam*) is often cited as an influence on the relatively individualistic disposition noted in ethnographic studies of Khmer. According to karmic doctrine, everyone is responsible for the merit or demerit he or she accumulates in this world, which determines the position achieved in the next life (Keyes 1977:84; Tambiah 1970:53).

Although there has been a significant amount of research on the more doctrinal aspects of Khmer Buddhist tradition, far less attention has been devoted to "vernacular" or "practical" Buddhism. Even less research has been devoted to the processes by which elders transmit practical Buddhist and Khmer values to youth. Yet these processes lie at the heart of Khmer identity. If karmic doctrines or individualistic attitudes are indeed features of Khmer social life, at some point they must be inculcated in members of the Khmer community. That process of cultural transmission is a focus of this book.

Over the six years of my research among Khmer refugees living in the Boston area, I aimed to explore both the resilience and social transformation of Khmer identity in the United States. One of the central purposes of my research was to determine which aspects of Khmer Buddhist worldview and socialization are most directly involved in Khmer adjustment to American society. Grounded in the intensive examination of a particular community, the study builds on the growing interest among anthropologists and linguists in the transmission of culture and the processes of socialization (Schwartz 1978; Schieffelin and Ochs 1986; Peak 1991; Shweder 1991; Stafford 1995). Research on child socialization is seen as one important means of uncovering adult social norms. In also focusing on how the child acquires these norms, however, it is possible to document the attitudes and assumptions that form and inform their acquisition and transformation. Equally important, the focus on cultural acquisition provides an important optic for distinguishing idealized expressions of attitudes and norms from their practice in social life and their embodiment in the habits, perceptions, and attitudes of real people (Bourdieu 1977; Schwartz 1978; Bloch 1989).

Although it exercises a profound influence on the later acquisition of formal knowledge and discourse, this general socialization begins in the family even before the child can speak, when others may put appropriate words in her mouth and mold her body into appropriately deferential gestures. Patterns of respect and deference involving the child's kin relations are taught within the family and typically become models for later interactions with authority figures in the public sphere. At the same time, community and parental expectations about the child's cognitive abilities and hence social responsibility change in the course of the child's development. Different ethnocultural groups may hold quite distinctive theories about how that development should progress. Although these theories do not exhaustively determine actual socialization processes, they nonetheless play an important role in their outcome.

SOCIALIZATION AND MORAL EDUCATION

The concept of moral education with which I am concerned in this book has to do with the general social processes or patterns of socialization by which children are taught to identify with a whole way of life. This socialization especially includes the largely unspoken sensibilities about the nature of right and wrong, entitlements and responsibilities, individuality and the group. My methodology draws on and has common emphases with "character education" approaches under discussion in American education and public policy circles (see Glendon and Blankenhorn 1995). My approach differs, however, in its anthropological emphasis on the ways in which different peoples or cultures construe the nature of the moral. I draw on the work of such diverse authors as Arthur Kleinman (1988), Beatrice Whiting and Carolyn Pope Edwards (1988), and Richard Schweder (see Schweder, Mahapatra, and Miller 1987; and Schweder 1991). With this foundation, my approach shifts attention away from discussion of the virtues appropriate to a particular kind of modern society (such as, in most character education literature, a liberal society). Instead, I focus on the general processes by which children learn to identify with a particular reference or solidary group and, in so doing, open themselves to the assimilation of its culturally specific mores.

Central to this anthropological concern, then, is the process of moral identification. Even if a child is extensively exposed to the

moral ideas and feelings of a particular culture, this moral socialization will not take hold unless the child identifies affectively with that group. From a general, anthropological perspective, moral education is as much a matter of identification with a culture and social group as it is a simple transfer of moral knowledge from elders to youth. A critical variable in the process, therefore, is what sociologists and anthropologists call *reflexivity*, individuals' capacity to look at the content of their culture or society and to evaluate, embrace, or even reject it in light of their reflexive disposition (Giddens 1991; Beck, Giddens, and Lash 1994).

Reflexivity exists in all societies. Although public discussions of the concept sometimes depict culture as more or less uniformly distributed among a people, in even the smallest "traditional" society, there will be differing degrees of commitment to and engagement with local cultural mores. This reflexive engagement with culture becomes all the more important in modern, plural societies, in which people committed to very different customs and moral ideals may live together. In such circumstances, a child exposed to the moral socialization of elders may simultaneously be engaged with social or moral learning of a very different sort with others in the surrounding society.

At its most elementary level, this is the situation of Khmer Americans. They live in an extraordinarily plural and modern society. Moreover, the urban communities in which many Khmer Americans are concentrated are among the most diverse sectors of this multicultural society. They live, study, and work with Mexican Americans, Puerto Ricans, Irish Americans, African Americans, Salvadorans, and Italian Americans. In these circumstances, the moral values that Khmer parents convey are not necessarily reinforced by the myriad exchanges of everyday life. On the contrary, Khmer Americans daily find themselves in circumstances in which they ignore or outright deny the ethical values and interactional sensibilities of their elders.

Explicit moral instruction works best when it benefits from an ongoing, massive, implicit, contextual, and often unconscious reinforcement (Bourdieu 1977). As we shall see in this book, this multidimensional reinforcement of explicit moral teaching is exactly what Khmer moral education in the United States so often lacks. Nowhere is this tension more apparent than in the marked discontinuity be-