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# **CROSSING THE SEA**

**narratives of exile and illness  
among Cambodian refugees in New Zealand**

A thesis presented in fulfilment  
of the requirements for the degree of  
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## ABSTRACT

Cambodian refugees have settled in many countries of the West, including New Zealand. Cambodian refugees are consistently described as the most traumatised of Southeast Asian refugees; hence they are expected upon resettlement to be in special need of health care, which host countries must provide. Most Cambodians from rural areas have had little prior experience with Western-type health care, having employed mainly local (rural Cambodian) healing techniques, supplemented with a range of available Western and Asian medicines, in an environment of medical pluralism.

Using the ethnographic method, this three year study set out to determine illness experiences of resettled Cambodian refugees, and to interpret experiences in the contexts of the events that led to their fleeing Cambodia, the trauma of the flight itself, and the process of resettlement in an unfamiliar nation, geographically and culturally far distant from home. Theories that Cambodians hold regarding the origins, progress, and preferred treatments of illness are described. Experiences of seeking health care from New Zealand's biomedically based health services are presented, and complementary health-care practices such as Cambodian self-care and alternative medicines are identified.

Adult Cambodian who have survived severe deprivation, atrocities and profound loss often suffer serious ill health. Ill health is both cause and consequence of inability to acquire new skills and education, low facility in English, unemployment and poverty. For adults caught in the cycle of illness and poverty, social interaction is primarily with other Cambodians. A Cambodian sub-society on the margins of mainstream society has emerged, in which, among other things, healing practices are carried out.

Cambodian refugees show no reluctance to use Western medicine, and little desire to employ Cambodian medicine, which in any case is now largely unavailable. While some Cambodians suffer from diseases that appear amenable to Western medical diagnoses and treatments, others have been found to suffer intractable, often painful illnesses for which no biomedical explanation could be found. In such cases, the sufferers themselves offered explanations for their illnesses, drawing from Cambodian theories of illness, and personal life experiences, in doing so. However, some serious illnesses experienced by Cambodian refugees fit neither Cambodian nor Western biomedical disease categories. A result of exile is that familiar Cambodian systems of healing are no longer relevant, and at the same time, conditions of exile and transition cast doubt on former theories of illness, leading to a search both for understanding and for healing. Employing Cambodian self-care techniques together with Western and Asian medicines, resettled Cambodians are actively creating a transitional system of healing appropriate to their transitional status. Hard, solitary intellectual labour ("thinking too much") is a central process by means of which exiled Cambodians struggle to regain control of their shattered lives.

The development of a new system of healing is part of the global process of hybridization of cultures, accelerated by massive transnational migration. To depict both the danger and the generativity of the transformations of which Cambodian refugees are both agents and subjects, the study concludes by borrowing a Cambodian metaphor for giving birth: "crossing the river." Cambodians consider women post-childbirth to be weakened and vulnerable to illness, cold and wind; while the child is newly born into humanity, the mother too is reborn into a new social status. Refugees who have literally crossed the sea to settle in a new country are undergoing a similar rebirth.

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## **References**

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## GLOSSARY

*Khmer* words translated into English appear in order of first use in the text. I have adopted the conventions used by the principal translator/transcriber in transcribing *khmer* into English. Definitions and explanations are drawn from:

Naat, Dj. (1967) Dictionnaire Cambodgien (Tome 1). Paris: Institut de l'Aise du Sud-Est.

Naat, Dj. (1968) Dictionnaire Cambodgien (Tome 2). Paris: Institut de l'Aise du Sud-Est.

Huffman, F.E. and Proum, I. (1978) English-Khmer Dictionary. Mass: Yale University Press.

### Chapter 1

*khmer*: the descriptor for the dominant ethnic group of Cambodia; the name for the language of the *khmer* people, which is also the official language of Cambodia.

### Chapter 4

*dtoas*: "allergy"; a category of illnesses that afflict postpartum women who do not observe precautions, or are shocked.

*gkru khmer*: traditional Cambodian healer (literally, Cambodian teacher, or wise person).

*chmorb*: Cambodian birth attendant, traditional midwife.

### Chapter 5

*Cham*: name of a minority ethnic group of Cambodia, who are followers of the Muslim religion.

*Angkar Leo*: the regime of the Khmer Rouge; the State.

*cj'laat*: mobile teams of children and youths, during Khmer Rouge regime.

*suel'bpaak*: art, cultural dancing and music. The term was applied to dances practised under the Khmer Rouge to recruit, and to "educate" the population.

*Khmer Krohom*: *khmer* term for Khmer Rouge.

*wat*: Buddhist centre; residence of monks; place for community meetings for prayer, festivals, and non-religious reasons.  
Variously translated as "temple" and "pagoda".

*chheu kuo kbal*: "brain hurts", as when one is excessively worried and thinking.

*phol*: merit for doing good.

## Chapter 6

*baaraing*: people of European descent. In Southeast Asia used to denote foreigners, while in New Zealand used in reference to white New Zealanders.

*dton'dtine* [tontine]: a game to acquire large sums of money by pooling the contributions of all players.

*som'peah lea*: respectful greeting when departing, made by placing hands together at about chin level, bowing the head and bidding farewell.

*som'peah bh'ru*: respectful greeting at arrival, made by placing hands together at chin level, bowing the head, and informing elders of arrival.

*cjoal chn'um*: Cambodian New Year, which falls on April 13.

*p'jum buend*: Ancestor ceremony, which falls sometime in August-September.

## Chapter 7

*gkuet cj'roum*: "thinking too much"; literally "to think excessively".

*bpi! baak cjuet*: worry; "thinking a lot" about the difficulties of life; literally "a difficult, or hard, state of mind".

*prouy cjuet*: worry, or anxiety in the face of danger.

*a'rom*: memory, or state of mind, accompanied by feelings.

*nuek keuhn*: to remember vividly.

*sok sub'bai*: Healthy, well. *Sok* means safe; *sub'bai* is happy. Together, this means "I am well, safe, healthy".

*ot sub'bai dte*: not happy; not in a state of well-being. This is not necessarily accompanied by having a disease.

*prouy cj'roum*: worry too much, sometimes used interchangeably with "think too much".

*gkuet klarng*: thinking very hard.

*smok-smarnh*: state of mind that is complex, complicated, difficult, clouded.

*lob*: confused.

*gkam*: fate (*karma*).

*sraucj dtuek*: a "shower", a sprinkling of holy water to bless and bring good luck.

*bon* ceremony: merit-making ceremony.

*too*: relieved, eased, made soft.

## Chapter 8

*sue*: fatigued.

*k'jol*: a state of general unwellness, with symptoms of dizziness, headache, nausea, fatigue, abdominal pain, and diarrhoea, relieved by "coining" and other similar techniques. Can be the precursor of more serious illness, and "coining" is believed to help avert full-blown sickness. *K'jol* is also described as resulting from poor circulation.

*pey*: a general term meaning afraid, fright. When more severe and causing shock, the term *dtok sl'oht* is used.

*grun nji-ac*: a fever when the sufferer feels excruciatingly cold.

*grun pouh-vien*: lit. "fever of the intestines"; probably typhoid.

*grun chanj*: malaria.

*heum*: swelling of face, body, legs and arms as a result of starvation. The term also refers to a condition resulting from a lack of sugar.

*tnam k'dav*: "hot" medicine.

*sor'sai*: nerves.

*cjea*: recover, get better.

*on'dtung cjuek*: eel bite.

*k'njaak*: a sensation of chill in the body; a shiver down the spine.

## Chapter 9

*cjaak*: stab, inject. *Cjaak tnam* refers to giving medicine by injection.

*gkru bpat*: "Western" style doctor, a concept which incorporates paramedics and nurses.

*tnam acj dtun-sai*: lit. "rabbit droppings", a derogatory term for traditional Cambodian medicine used *only* during the Pol Pot regime.

*dtor'nueb*: offering to *gkru khmer* at time of requesting assistance.

*lauk gkru*: generally means teacher. *Lauk sonk* is used to address a monk, or can be used as a respectful form of address.

*dta*: lit. "grandfather"; also used as a term of respect when addressing old men.

*Pali*: ancient language of South Asia, in which scriptures were written. *Pali* words are used for their supernatural power, and therefore *Pali* words are spoken or "sprayed" by a *gkru khmer* or by a monk to exert spiritual force for good.

*s'raucj dtuek*: a ritual shower of holy water, to bless or protect against bad luck or danger.

*kbuon*: rules.

*preah dti-nairng*: foretelling according to the rules, by reading the palm, and according to the date of birth.

*tnam*: medicine. Types of medicine distinguished with qualifiers, for example: *tnam khmer*: Cambodian medicine; *tnam acj dtun-sai*: lit. "rabbit droppings", a derogatory term for traditional Cambodian medicine; *tnam k'dav*: "hot", or warming, medicine; *tnam tro'cjeak*: "cold", or cooling, medicine; *tnam d'os*: scraping medicine; *tnam bpat*: "Western" medicine; *tnam cjaak*, injected medicine.

*saab*: tasteless.

*dus*: to warm, or wake up, medicine by blowing a *pali* incantation.

*bpues*: poison.

*aab preay*: spirits, ghosts.

*oucj*: moxibustion, a form of treatment by burning on areas corresponding to "nerves". On small patches of material, termed *bpoy*, prepared from a coconut or similar palm, is placed a plug of "wool" scraped from bamboo or a particular kind of soft wood. These are then lit, and smoulder until burnt away.

*cjub'cjour*: treatment by holding or controlling the pulses, applying pressure.

*dol so*: depending on the context, this general term can mean "thorough", or "excessive".

*sro'bhun*: numbness; pins and needles.

*sro'gkear*: skin, or teeth, or ears sore to touch.

*cjock cjaab*: a sharp stabbing pain.

*s'riev s'ranh*: sensation of cold shivers, as with a chill.

## Chapter 10

*gon'seng yoin*: the inscribing of words or design on paper or cloth, which are worn as a scarf to offer protection through magical power to the wearer.

*k'se gk'taa*: amulets, usually made by rolling soft metal on which *Pali* words have been inscribed, which are then worn on a piece of string for protection.

*toir-aa*: "spirit words" spoken to create a protective cordon.

*pro'dtiel*: medicinal plants.

*aab*: witch

*koas k'jol*: "coining". *Koas* literally means "scraping", usually carried out using the edge of a coin lubricated in Vicks ointment or in Tiger Balm, although the edge of a spoon or other blunt-edged object is sometimes used.

*cjoub k'jol*: "cupping"; *cjoub* literally means "cup".

*cjaab k'jol*: "pinching". Literally, massage for *k'jol*.

*cjaab sor'sai*: massage of "nerves".

## Chapter 11

*chlong dtunlei*: lit. crossing the river; euphemism for giving birth.

*gkourt gkoan*: to give birth [direct speech].

*pro'soat gkoan*: a synonym used to refer to the high-born giving birth.

*tnam s'doh*: medicine to ease labour, into which an incantation has been sprayed.

*a'gkum kie-ta*: the practice of magic.

*p'njak*: startle.

*sor'sai kjey*: unripe, or young nerves, believed to be the state of the "nerves" of the woman after childbirth.

*dtoas sor'sai*: disorder of "nerves" following childbirth, for example after a fright, or shock.

*kor*: sweet and salty braised chicken, pork, or beef.

*aing pleurng*: "grilling", or "roasting" of the new mother. A practice of burning a fire beneath her bed so as to heat her, based on the belief that after childbirth the woman is "cool" inside, and needs to be warmed.

*knong-kei*: the post-natal period, literally "indoors for a month".

*c'jeinh bpi pleurng*: the completion of the post-natal period, literally "to come out from the fire".

*ch'pung*: steaming; an alternative to "grilling".

*gkom'laing*: energy.

*rog*: sickness, disease.