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REFUGEE MEDICINE CALIFORNIA-STYLE:
MONKS, SHAMEN AND A DASH OF SPIRITSBy
Cammy Wilson

At this point it's hard to say what prompted the outcry. It could have been the Buddhist monks invited to visit hospital patients. It could have been the native Khmer practitioners -- witch doctors to some -- who periodically cast out evil spirits onto the ward floor. It could have been the influence of Est among the western nurses and doctors or the temerity of some personnel in expounding wellness theories and the realignment of body energy. It could even have been the laying on of hands -- a Christian custom (like casting out devils). But the most notorious act seems to me to have been the erection outside the ward of a sparkling, red, white and gold "spirit house."



Two refugee boys and their mother wait outside the Phoenix ward at Khao I-Dang.

At any rate, the San Francisco medical team that prompted all the consternation at Khao I-Dang -- a refugee camp of about 135,000 a few miles from the Thai-Cambodian border -- is on its way out. By the end of the year, the group, which calls itself Phoenix, expects to leave the camp and the country.

Californians sometimes have a tendency to live the future, a bent that earns them no goodwill credits among those who plod gingerly through the present. Likewise, the San Franciscans' approach at Khao I-Dang clashed with that of some of the camp's Christian groups who run hospital wards and influence other segments of camp life. Some Christian missionaries looked upon the Californians' support of shamen and Buddhist monks as "pushing Buddhism down the Khmers," as one missionary put it.

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Actually, Buddhism is the native religion of the Khmers, however much deposed Cambodian head of state Pol Pot tried to wipe it out.

The Christians, themselves, proselytize freely. They have at their disposal color films with sound tracks in Khmer, Bibles and other religious books, likewise in Khmer, hymnals, posters and other teaching paraphernalia. But they reacted sharply to the Californians' methods.

"They just makes asses of themselves," said Don Cormack, a missionary who teaches at the Christian church in the camp. "These Americans from California were very keen to get local practitioners. They put up the only spirit house in the camp... They encourage these shamen -- sort of local, quack doctors who dabble in herbs and a lot of evil spirits...In many ways, I felt these people (the refugees) needed rescuing from these idiots."

Max Navalta, a registered nurse from San Francisco who works in the Phoenix ward, granted that there are fundamental differences in that ward and the wards operated by Christian groups.

"We are the only ward that operates in the framework of the Khmers' traditional culture," he said. "The shaman is a part of the Khmers' culture. We've set it up so people can be treated as whole people and it worked out really well. But we've been beset by a lot of problems. There were other people who were more established in the camp, who were more Christian-oriented."

The Californians perturbed some members of the medical community, including the Khmer Medical Association.

"(They) didn't like it because they said they were getting

Max Navalta and the spirit house, symbol of the resolve to allow Cambodian shamen to practice medicine in the camp.



away from this before Pol Pot's time and this is a throw-back to the old days," an American doctor told me. "They thought it would hurt their credibility."

"I think a lot of misunderstanding by conventional medical people (came about) because they didn't understand. We're not as holistically oriented as the early team was," Navalta explained. "A lot of people involved then were into what I would call 'higher consciousness.' They did a lot of nurturing, a lot of touching, a lot of holding. They would hold patients and they would bathe them. They would do what they called 'touch for health.' You have to know the philosophy that the body has certain energy that flows in certain ways. When you're ill, everything's not flowing properly. So they would have to teach people to realign that flow. They would do it by the passing of hands over certain parts of the body."



Three refugee children eat from a plate outside a hospital ward.

The inspiration for the Californians' healing approach was a Marin county, California, psychologist, Virginia Veach. She pulled together a team of holistic medical people to "deal with the whole person and to deal with the psychosocial problems of the refugees," Navalta said.

Two newspapers and a television station created what he called the Cambodian Relief Fund, and citizens throughout the San Francisco Bay area contributed. The group's funding now comes through a San Francisco organization called "Rescue Now." Technically, Phoenix operates in the camp under the auspices of the International Rescue Commission (IRC).

Whatever kinds of problems the group anticipated before leaving California, they certainly have found a myriad of psychosocial problems since their arrival in the border camp.

The medical team sees almost every kind of case, including hysterical patients and ones exhibiting severe signs of paranoia.

"The refugees believe in good spirits and bad spirits, and they believe that spirits can come into them and make them do

things, like speak English or speak in tongues," Navalta said. "Sometimes they come in speaking two or three languages or believe they do.

"Many of the women who are patients have no outlets for their anger and frustration. There were a lot of forced marriages during Pol Pot. The wife may just 'check out' for a few days. She will go into a comatose state and have seizures. But examination shows that patients like this are fully awake. It's often a problem in the family or a delayed grief reaction to all the trauma suffered over the last five years. It's usually manifested by the belief that someone is outside their house at night with an ax or a knife or a gun. It takes the form of a delusion. They can't sleep for a few nights. Maybe it's manifested by choking sensations or not being able to breath. They fear they will pass out or their arms and legs won't work."

There are real problems of safety in the camp, including the continued risk of robberies, rape and murder; mayhem may come at the hands of Thai soldiers or from members of various Khmer factions, such as the Khmer Rouge or the Khmer Seri. The potential danger that refugees face from armed groups like these "has something to do with the refugees' fears," Navalta said.

In addition to psychological problems, patients coming into the ward have physical ailments ranging from malnutrition to malaria to worms. All the patients receive western medical attention. They are first diagnosed at an admissions building and assigned to a ward, partly on the basis of the diagnosis. There are special wards for communicable diseases like leprosy and cholera. The assignment also depends on who has a bed available. A patient with dysentery or worms, for instance, may wind up in one of three types of wards: in a Christian ward, where the person may receive a Bible printed in Khmer soon after entering; in a non-religious ward where medical treatment is the only order of business, or in the California ward, where the patient who so chooses can see a shaman or a Buddhist monk or both.

Patients treated by a shaman may feel they are possessed by spirits or feel the dead are calling them to join them; or they may have a problem with delayed grief. The shaman has many possible treatments. He may hand out pills and medicines or burn incense and sprinkle holy water on the patient (like the holy water used in some Catholic rituals).

The "water ritual," which requires a stick of incense and a glass of water, may be used to drive out the spirits. The shaman lights the incense and then uses it to stir the water. Whether he chants or not, he basically blesses the water, which he then sprinkles onto the patient. Anyone who has seen the multi-million-dollar-grossing movie, the "Exorcist," would recognize similarities between the rituals used to cast out devils by the Catholic priest in the movie and practices of rural shamen, who cast out devils in the Khao I-Dang hospital ward.

Sometimes they give the patient an herb in rice wine that induces vomiting. The shamen believe it's good for the person because it gets the spirit out. Basically, this technique is used in depression cases when people believe they are possessed.

"When he gives this to them, we're not supposed to give any medicine to stop the vomiting," Navalta said. "After they've vomited once or twice, the patients believe the spirit has been cast out."

A ritual healing technique may fail. There was the case of a girl brought into the ward who was believed to be possessed by spirits of her dead parents, who had been killed by Pol Pot forces.



Mother bathes son in hospital.

"She was psychotic," Navalta recalled. "She was verbally abusive and unmanageable. She would take her clothes off and shout curses and blasphemy. She was saying something against the gods and against Buddhism, which the Khmers described as 'very bad talk.'"

The shaman tried his rituals on the child and her behavior failed to change. Then he assumed what you might call his "village wise man" role. He took the child home with him, where he and his family gave her the attention she'd lacked.

"She was an orphan and there was no one who stayed with her and took care of her. When she had people around who cared for her, she was all right...She was fine when she came back."

The shaman may be only someone to talk to. He may listen to what a patient says about the problems at home: what family members survive, which relatives remain separated. One of the biggest difficulties the refugees live with is the uncertainty whether their children or spouses or former friends and neighbors are dead or alive. Refugees remarry, sometimes to discover that a previous mate is alive. Normally shamen do not practice in seriously ill cases. Nor is a patient required to see a shaman in other cases.

"There are some Khmers who don't believe in the shamen and don't avail themselves of the shamen," Navalta said. "They were the students before the takeover and they have that choice."

Whether the shaman prescribes medicine, performs a cleansing ritual or only talks with the patients, "usually the patients come out of it in three or four days," he said. But there are cases no one seems able to help. Navalta motioned to a figure at one end of the ward. A young woman lay face up on a bed, staring at the ceiling. The woman's mother, an elderly woman, head shaven, sat on a corner of the bed.

"This young woman has been mute for three years," Navalta said. "She was beaten very badly during Pol Pot's time and she was probably raped, too. The shaman tried to treat her at home, but had no effect so he brought her here. She smiles most of the time. I get the feeling that she fantasizes a lot, that she's delusional; she just doesn't express it verbally."

The medical problems of the camp's population have declined in gravity and so some of the hospital wards, like the Phoenix ward, are being closed. "We tried for about a month to get a commitment from the IRC," Navalta said. "We were in a Catch 22 situation. They would say, 'You raise the money, then we'll see if we can find a place for you.' But we couldn't go to our sponsors without having a place."

The Californians had expected at one point to occupy a ward the Seventh Day Adventists were vacating. Both groups would have shared the same space during a two-week transition. "Two of our members went over and told them that we were a holistic group and that we would be having monks come in occasionally, and that the shamen would practice," Navalta recalled. "Three days later they told us that they had formed a medical team and were going to keep the ward."

Support for shamen has grown despite the resistance. Dr. Jean-Pierre Hiegel, a psychiatrist and field coordinator for the International Committee of the Red Cross, has introduced shamen into hospital settings at several of the camps and supervised their work at the Phoenix ward. Dr. Daniel Sussott, former Khao I-Dang medical coordinator, who now oversees the work of the voluntary agencies, told me that, "We encourage the practice of traditional medicine in all its forms. These people will eventually go back to Cambodia where they won't have access to sophisticated medical care."

With the Phoenix ward's closing, camp authorities are building an out-patient ward to be staffed by dozens of shamen. There's also a nursing school in the camp that evolved from the ward and that teaches the Khmers basic alternative medicine, using the book, Where There Is No Doctor, which has been translated into French and Khmer. The Californians are negotiating for it to be used in Cambodia, Navalta said.

When the Californians leave, as they're due to at the end of the year, chances are their spirit house, which came to typify the group in the minds of many, will go. "The first team bought it in Aranyaprathet," a nearby village, "and it became sort of a symbol," Navalta said.

He shrugged.

"I'm told the Khmers do not have spirit houses."

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