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WESTERN HOSPITAL -- CAMBODIAN HEALER

By

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Nhar Phan is a shaman, an herbalist, a practitioner of traditional Khmer medicine. Some people call him a witch doctor. At 1 p.m. on a hot, dusty afternoon, he begins making his daily rounds at a hospital in the Khao I-Dang refugee camp a few miles from the Thai-Cambodian border. His first patient is a young woman referred to him by the American medical team that operates the hospital. The woman has converted to a new religion, which deeply troubles her Buddhist mother. So today Nhar Phan will perform the Khmer equivalent of a deprogramming.

Nhar works in a special ward run by a group of doctor and nurse volunteers. San Francisco citizens raised the money to send them to Khao I-Dang and to support their work in the sprawling camp of makeshift, bamboo buildings that house 135,000 Indo-chinese refugees. And while the shaman is welcomed by the medical staff in the ward where he works, some of the doctors and nurses in the camp's other hospital wards are hostile to the idea of a witch doctor's receiving referrals -- and therefore credibility -- from western doctors.

The patient is a woman of 20 who's wearing a long-sleeved lavender blouse and a long, green and yellow skirt. She is exhibiting symptoms with which parents everywhere are familiar. She doesn't eat properly and her dress style is atrocious, says the mother, who's wearing thin,



Cambodian Nhar Phan practices medicine as a shaman in western-run hospital ward at Khao I-Dang refugee camp on Thai border.

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black pants and a long-sleeved, white blouse. She also doesn't do her chores and sometimes, when she's called, she pretends not to hear. The mother is convinced that the daughter's shortcomings are attributable to the new religion she practices: Islam.

Mother and daughter sit together near the middle of a narrow, wooden hospital bed on a straw mat about as thick as a pencil lead. The bed lacks a mattress, sheets or pillows. Their feet are tucked under them off the charcoal-colored rocks spread over the dirt floor. The shaman, wearing a blue shirt and trousers, takes the daughter's hand, intent on her pulse. Around his neck is a stethoscope like the ones western doctors use. By listening to the pulse in the veins on the back of the hand, Nhar says, he can detect abnormalities in various parts of the body. He doesn't use the stethoscope but he does closely observe both the women: the daughter, pretty, petulant but healthy looking; the mother, who does most of the talking and who seems as perturbed as an American parent might be whose child has joined the Unification Church. The mother tells Nhar the daughter's father was Moslem. After he died, the daughter began to practice his religion.

"Her mother say Islam agree with her father, and, maybe when her father die, the spirit come in her," says an interpreter, who translates what the three are saying. The Khmers, like the Thais and many other Asians, believe in the power of spirits. The mother fears that the father's spirit might compel the daughter to convert to his religion.

How does she show her beliefs? the shaman asks.

"Mother say, 'she doesn't eat the pork,'" the interpreter says. "The custom of Islam is like this. Before, she can eat the pork.

Nhar's neighborhood: cramped, bamboo huts, dirt roads and lots of idle time. Thais assign Cambodians to one area of refugee camp, Vietnamese to another. Sprawling camp is source of food, medical aid, succor for 135,000 Indochinese refugees.



"Mother say, 'Sometime she lie down and when we call her to take the rice, she does not hear and then (when she comes) she will drink only the water and not take the food. She has no pain any place, only she cannot feel hungry.'"

The mother seizes a long piece of material, the one extra garment the daughter seems to have, and flings it over her head. She winds it round and round and then bends low, peeking out coyly from the coils of material.

"She say that is the custom of Islam, to wear the cloth," the interpreter says, referring to the mother's pantomime.

The shaman asks how long the daughter has been exhibiting these symptoms.

"She get this disease during 'Pol Pot come,'" the interpreter says, using a Khmer phrase that refers to the years of genocidal rule under Communist head of state Pol Pot, whom the Vietnamese Communists deposed after they invaded Cambodia late in 1978.



It was also during "Pol Pot come" that the mother's husband, a soldier of Lon Nol, was killed, he says.

"Pol Pot call him to teach him about Communism and he die," the interpreter says.

The shaman puts his left thumb over a vein in the young woman's wrist and taps on his thumb several times. He looks up.

"This disease is by Islam," the interpreter says. "It cast a spell over her and he will use his medicine to make the spirit leave."

Nhar tells refugees their fortunes from his hut in the camp.

Instead of writing a prescription for the medicine he gives, the shaman pulls six small, dark, round balls from a satchel and hands them to the daughter. He tells her to take three of the pill-sized balls and then three more later in the day. Medicine like this the shaman learned after he left his village and went to live with the "monks in the forest," the interpreter says. "They teach him their methods and he write them down in the ledger."

As for what goes into the balls, the shaman reaches back into the satchel and takes out a thick, bound book, the kind people use to keep track of their business transactions. The

recipe he opens it to calls for mace, cinnamon, cloves, persimmon seeds, honey, ginger, lime, garlic, tamarind and a final element, the interpreter says, the "stick that has a sweet taste."

To duplicate the shaman's medicine, the interpreter says to use 200 milligrams of everything except the honey and the "stick that has the sweet taste." The shaman uses only 100 milligrams of the latter, and, after pounding all the ingredients into a fine powder, he uses just enough honey to make them all stick together. Then he pinches off small segments and rolls them into balls.

The medicine that Nhar prescribes comes from the nearby Thai village of Aranyaprathet. Because Nhar, like the other refugees, is forbidden by the Thai military to leave the refugee camp, he regularly gives his grocery list of medical ingredients to a western hospital worker. She takes it to a Chinese drug store where the druggist can read Khmer.

Done with the first patient, the shaman gives mother and daughter a reassuring smile and says something to them in parting.

"He promises that only Islam is wrong," the interpreter says. "Tomorrow she get well."

Mother and daughter look at each other and smile. The shaman moves on. His patients are waiting.

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