



**Nancy J. Smith-Hefner.** *Khmer American: Identity and Moral Education in a Diasporic Community.* Berkeley: University of California Press, 1999, xx + 237 pages, ISBN: 0-520-21348-3 (cloth), US \$55.00, ISBN: 0-520-21349-1 (paperback), US \$19.95.

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The recent study of Buddhism in the United States has been marked by a number of positive developments in research and publication. The map of Buddhist America's small but visible terrain is frequently being redrawn as scholars employ new methods and resources in understanding the place of Buddhists in American society. Still, some aspects of the study of Buddhism in America remain in need of a more accurate survey. Focused descriptive or interpretive ethnographies and histories of Buddhists in their more intimate settings have been, unfortunately, particularly sparse. Buddhism in America manifests itself in socially and geographically localized contexts. Our future understanding of it will rest upon research of particular Buddhists in distinct places, times, and social contexts. Perhaps, then, in some sense, what the study of Buddhism in America may need most are research projects in which the study of Buddhism, as such, is not necessarily the central purpose.

With this speculation in mind, Nancy J. Smith-Hefner's research on Cambodians in Boston, *Khmer American: Identity and Moral Education in a Diasporic Community*, is all the more appreciated. Her work covers a range of topics, including the socialization of children, patterns of social cohesion, moral education, and the nature of refugee life, all of which are centered on an examination of the "social and cultural mechanisms for reconstructing a Khmer identity in the United States" (p. 19). The result is an ethnography of

“everyday” ethical and religious problems and practices, and coincidentally, thus, of “everyday” Buddhism in America. Although occasionally exhibiting some weakness of focus and specificity in language and definition (especially with regard to this notion of identity), her work is a welcome addition to the study of migration and religion.

Smith-Hefner, an associate professor of applied linguistics at the University of Massachusetts at Boston, writes that she spent six years conducting her research. She attempts, in some respects, to bridge the divide between the social sciences and ethics and the humanities. The study “builds on the growing interest among anthropologists and linguists in the transmission of culture and the process of socialization” in order to understand “which aspects of Khmer Buddhist worldview and socialization are most directly involved in Khmer adjustment to American society” (p. 13). Apart from its oblique concern with Buddhism in America, her work is valuable to readers of this journal precisely because her study is grounded in an examination of Khmer American social ethics, which are, of course, in good measure, a function of Khmer Buddhist practices and ideologies.

Her work is notable as well because, although it has a broader purpose, it is centered upon an examination of the religious and moral lives of children. Her interest in the project was initially sparked by observations of Khmer American children that raised for her a series of questions about the way they are socialized in the United States and what that means for the community as a whole (p. xii). As further justification for her focus on child socialization (though simply being interested in documenting children’s religious and social lives might have been sufficient), she notes that “research on child socialization is seen as one important means of uncovering adult norms.” By focusing on how the child acquires such norms, “it is possible to document the attitudes and assumptions that form and inform their acquisition and transformation” in the diasporic context. This focus on “cultural acquisition” in children also enables her to distinguish “idealized expressions of attitudes and norms from their practice in social life and their embodiment in habits, perceptions, and attitudes of real people” (p. 13).

Her study begins by sketching the shape of Khmer religion and social relations prior to both migration and the Cambodian genocide under the Khmer Rouge. Smith-Hefner suggests that Khmer society is endowed with two “cultural moralities,” exhibiting a strain between norms based upon Buddhist-derived notions of individual autonomy and those of a “relational morality” concerned with family reputation and social and generational position (p. 19, p. 92). This relational morality manifests itself through two views of the self: as karmically conditioned individual and as relational being whose obligations and privileges are derived from social context. This basic tension is, she

writes, much misunderstood by scholars of Khmer society and yet essential for grasping the fundamental “challenge of Khmer adjustment to the social idioms and morality of life in the United States” (p. 20).

In chapter one, the author summarizes recent Khmer and Khmer American history and delivers an overview of her method of analysis. In light of her concern with children, Smith-Hefner articulates a methodology that keeps moral education—defined as “the general social process or patterns of socialization by which children are taught to identify with a whole way of life”—at the center of her project. In examining such a broad topic, she draws on the work of scholars of American education and public policy as well as anthropology. She guides her study toward an examination of the “general processes” by which Khmer children come to see themselves as Khmer and, thus, accept Khmer mores (pp. 14–15). The specific problem here with Khmer Americans, as with any cultural minority in a pluralistic society, is one in which a “child exposed to the moral socialization of elders may be simultaneously engaged with social and moral learning of a very different sort with others in the surrounding society” (p. 15).

Chapter two is a discussion of Khmer religious practices and institutions in Boston. The chapter begins with an explanation of the declining influence of Buddhism in Cambodia in the late 1960s and 1970s and the difficulties (including pressure to convert to Christianity) that refugees experienced in the camps following departure from Cambodia. She chronicles the difficulties of religious life in exile, including a discussion of the development of the Khmer Buddhist temple in Boston and Khmer beliefs and practices as they appear in the United States. She is particularly concerned with the relationship of spirit worship and divinatory practices to more “normative” Buddhist beliefs such as karma and the accumulation of merit. Ultimately her aim is to show that Khmer religious practices and beliefs paradoxically express and reconfirm both individualism and social reciprocity in Boston Khmer family and communal life.

In chapter three, Smith-Hefner further weaves together her theory of Khmer cultural opposition, interlacing her perspective on Khmer American Buddhism with a discussion of Khmer American child-rearing practices. She argues that Buddhist notions of karma and rebirth heavily influence early childhood socialization practices. The child is seen as an existing being with formed, if not mature, predilections, abilities, and habits. The child is helpless and incapable of reasoning, but also in possession of other karmically ordained abilities and traits. Along with karma, spirits and other deities are also invoked in explaining a child’s behavior or condition. The result of this perspective, Smith-Hefner argues, is a mode of early childhood parenting that, by contemporary American standards at least, might seem either ne-

glectful or indulgent (pp. 75–76). As the child grows older, however, “parents begin to stress that they must also learn their place within the Khmer social hierarchy” through training in the use of the Khmer languages complicated but vital kin terminology (such as “mother’s elder brother,” “father’s younger brother,” “paternal grandmother”), other aspects of polite language, and the importance of “face” and family reputation (pp. 84–85).

The Khmer notion of the mature person as a relational being becomes increasingly important in the treatment and disciplining of a child as she ages. In chapter four, which focuses on moral education, Smith-Hefner explores how this relational concept is more strongly inculcated in older children and adolescents as a rhetoric and practice of filial respect and “face”—a linking of individual and family reputation. Smith-Hefner describes the stresses that migration has placed upon the historical, customary relationship between parents and children as well as between community elders and children. In prewar Cambodia, the “two moralities” complemented each other. In America, the balance between them has become strained as “the extended family and integral community that both reinforced patterns of appropriate behavior and protected children ... are largely lacking” (p. 121). Behavior by both parents and children that is deemed inappropriate by Khmer Americans or larger American society becomes more common in a context in which other expected social conditioning is absent. Smith-Hefner’s analysis of child development here and in subsequent chapters focuses on Khmer parents and society’s “markedly different expectations of daughters and sons,” particularly as they grow older (pp. 96–99). In examining the different “rules” and ritual obligations for boys and girls, as well as different attitudes toward the behavior of each, she suggests that the disequilibrium has a significantly greater impact on females. Ultimately, though, for all of her subjects, moral confusion is a fact of life in America.

The strain only intensifies as the child gets older, becomes more independent and eventually enters the schoolyard. Chapter five extends Smith-Hefner’s “two moralities” theory to the challenges Khmer students face in Boston-area public schools. The chapter begins by covering aspects of education in Khmer society generally, including Khmer education in pre-migration and pre-revolutionary Khmer society, education and its relationship to gender, and student-teacher interaction. Smith-Hefner particularizes “cultural discontinuities that Khmer children face in American schools” (p. 18). Khmer parents, she finds, believe that karmically determined “intrinsic disposition strongly influences ... achievement” (p. 146). Intertwined as they are with issues of family reputation and face, parental guidance and intervention must be balanced with notions of the child’s individuality. Ultimately, discipline and encouragement may be curtailed as the parents’ understanding of the

child's "destiny" or "predetermined nature" crystallizes (pp. 146–149).

In her analysis of sexuality and marriage in chapter six, Smith-Hefner suggests that, in a diasporic setting in which old bases for individual reputation are fragmented and lost, weddings have become the "critical indexes of families' standing and reputations in the community." She argues that that they, thus, also bring a strain to children, family, and communal relationships (p. 171). But the stakes are high for many Khmer American parents, given that the quality of the marriage of one's child is thought to dictate the degree of one's welfare in old age. For Smith-Hefner, it is this "functional logic of intergenerational reciprocity" that is under duress in diaspora, as well as, often, family reputation (p. 174). Conflicts over appropriate marriage partners—and dating partners—can involve any and all family members, but tend to be focused on young women, whose interactions with the larger American society are subject to a common, and inflammatory, double standard (p. 175). For Smith-Hefner, issues of sexual misconduct—almost always seen as a problem of Khmer women and not men—and intergenerational conflict over marriage choices are functions of long-held Khmer practices and attitudes being reproduced under new pressures in a new context. Smith-Hefner's point here may be controversial: The Khmer Americans of Boston have expended enormous effort to recreate, in some form, many customs and practices that, in the ideal at least, supported family and community life in Cambodia. But the labor involved in meeting that ideal has ultimately "created as much disruption or destabilization as it has cultural 'reproduction'" (pp. 185–186).

Smith-Hefner concludes her study in chapter seven by attempting to complicate her presentation of the themes of previous chapters according to a "dual pattern of adaptation" related to a gap between haves and have-nots among the Khmer community in Boston. As Smith-Hefner shows, conflicts in the community cut across the socioeconomic divide. These conflicts are manifested in generational antagonism, battles over educational standards, and in competition for control of the temple. Members of the Boston Khmer community collide as they imagine their future and remember their past in different ways. Temple clashes and even schisms are nothing new in Cambodia or Buddhist North America. But here they serve as yet another example of the rough path of immigrant adaptation to the United States and the changing role of Buddhism, and Buddhist institutions and ethical principles in Khmer American daily life. Refugees' adaptation to life in the United States is not uniform. A few find "release and freedom," often, it seems, coupled with material success, while others "lament the fragmentation of their lives and the loss of a (remembered) ethnical mutuality" (p. 203).

Smith-Hefner is clearly committed to understanding the lives of her sub-

jects in as complete a way as possible. Her research has been both long-term and comprehensive. The limitations of her book arise in her own conceptualization of Khmer “identity.” Her use of that word in a more-or-less undefined way is confusing. Her explication of the manner in which that identity is articulated and developed is not always clear.<sup>1</sup> She conflates the collective and the individual (though perhaps with good reason), avoids the slipperiness of the term and the world of concepts behind it, and carries on with fine descriptive detail. If her goal is to understand how Khmer children become “Khmer” (and what role Buddhism plays in that), perhaps more attention could have been paid to how and when they are also “American.” In that same vein, one wonders what particularly about Boston and the wider American society has helped to form the contours of Khmer American life here. Furthermore, her “two moralities” theory, engaging though it is, occasionally suffers from fuzziness or appears forced. I am persuaded that the ethical conflicts she describes are real. But I am still uncertain how these “two moralities” operated together prior to migration or whether, in fact, this moral conflict in diaspora is so directly the cause of so much social dysfunction.

Finally though, Smith-Hefner has written a fine and effective ethnography. Its descriptive detail and use of Khmer refugees’ oral histories should make it a useful resource for the study of Buddhist lives in North America. In delving for the intimate detail of Khmer social lives, she has also broken new ground in the study of Asian American life. Her work privileges her subjects’ Cambodian pasts, and takes seriously the notion that specific practices and ideologies can shape a people’s adaptation to a new society as much as immediate economic and political circumstances. In sum, she has drawn a sophisticated portrait of immigrant Buddhist life that should stand as required reading for any student of immigration, Asian American religion, or Buddhist life in North America.

#### Note

1. See Roger Rouse, “Questions of Identity: Personhood and Collectivity in Transnational Migration to the United States,” *Critique of Anthropology* 15: 4 (1995) 351–380.