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Education, Gender, and Generational Conflict among Khmer Refugees

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This article explores an example of in-group variation in minority educational achievement by investigating the reasons why a disproportionately high number of young Khmer women drop out of school. Based on 30 months of ethnographic study among Khmer refugees in metropolitan Boston, the research demonstrates the importance of cultural and social-historical influences for understanding Khmer educational achievement and distinguishing it from that of other East and Southeast Asian immigrant groups. KHMER REFUGEES, MINORITY EDUCATION, GENDER ROLES, ETHNIC IDENTITY, GENERATIONAL CONFLICT

Recent sociological and ethnographic research has significantly enhanced our understanding of the educational performance of minorities in the United States. This same research, however, has been characterized by serious disagreement about the precise social influences that shape minority educational achievement. Ethnographic studies have drawn attention to the influence of culture on school achievement. According to cultural compatibility theory, for example, if a child is socialized in a family setting with behavioral and cognitive routines compatible with those of the classroom, he or she is likely to do well in school. “When cultures provide some other set of social and psychological routines,” however, “schools and pupils are mutually frustrated” (Tharp 1989:51).

Other studies, like those of John Ogbu and Maria Matute-Bianchi (1986) and Margaret Gibson (1988), have tended to downplay the independent influence of culture, focusing instead on the macrosociological influences of history, politics, and social structure. Their research has taken note of immigrant minorities who, despite dramatic cultural and linguistic differences from their European-American counterparts, do significantly better in school than do indigenous minorities such as African- and Native-Americans. These studies have revealed that Chinese, Korean, Filipino, and Sikh immigrants often surpass mainstream European-Americans in school performance. Educational theorists like Ogbu (1987) see these data as confirmation of the view that broad social,
historical, and political features, not cultural mismatch per se, are the real key to minority educational achievement. Ogbu argues that, for these immigrant minorities, migration to the United States was a voluntary gesture marked by the adoption of attitudes conducive to educational achievement. Conversely, the less consistent educational success of indigenous minorities like African-Americans is a product of their history of forced migration and political subordination and their "caste-like" location in society as a whole. From this "ecological perspective" (as it is known), politics and social structure, not cultural dissonance, lie at the heart of minority school failure.

Despite the debate that has surrounded the recent literature on the education of minorities, it is now clear that these views are complementary rather than mutually exclusive (see Trueba 1991). The "cultural-mismatch" approach can benefit from a broader conceptual base, and the ecologists' approach, although identifying important influences on minorities' school performance, cannot alone account for the variation in school achievement that occurs within such broad sociological categories as "caste-like" or "immigrant" minorities.

The school performance of recent Southeast Asian refugees is a case in point. Notwithstanding the pervasive myth of the "Asian model minority," there is, in fact, considerable variation in the educational achievement of Southeast Asian refugee students. This variation is notable despite the fact that all refugees share certain structural similarities in status, social location, and political influence as refugees. Recent research among Southeast Asian immigrant groups has concluded that, although broad patterns of history and social structure do influence refugee educational achievement, these variables are not sufficient to explain why some Southeast Asian ethnic groups are doing better than others (Rumbaut and Ima 1988; Trueba 1988; Smith-Hefner 1990). To account for such in-group variation, we must look once again to differing patterns of culture, in particular, to patterns of behavior, cognition, and family socialization.

In this article I examine one such example of in-group variation in minority educational achievement by exploring the reasons why disproportionate numbers of Khmer females drop out of school. Based on 30 months of ethnographic research among Khmer refugees in metropolitan Boston, the findings presented here do not in any way deny the importance of macrosociological or "ecological" factors in the educational performance of Southeast Asian refugees. However, in attempting to understand why so many Khmer young women drop out of school, this research demonstrates that it is also necessary to understand certain features of culture and social history that distinguish Khmer from other Southeast Asian immigrants. Of particular importance here are recent changes in gender roles and gender ideology and their implications for the family, generational conflict, and authority.
Southeast Asian Educational Patterns and
the Boston Khmer Community

Although Southeast Asian refugees are generally reported to be performing quite well in American schools (Caplan et al. 1989), some ethnic groups are clearly doing better than others. Large-scale sociological studies of Southeast Asian adolescents in the United States indicate that, in general, Vietnamese, Sino-Vietnamese, and Hmong (hill-tribes people from Laos) are out-performing Khmer and ethnic Lao students (Rumbaut 1989; Rumbaut and Ima 1988). The higher levels of academic achievement among Vietnamese and Sino-Vietnamese are consonant with the greater social resources of these immigrant groups. The criteria of social resources alone, however, cannot explain the relative performance of Hmong, Khmer, and Lao, since the Hmong are the least advantaged of Southeast Asian groups.

Large-scale studies also report that among these same groups, Cambodian students are the most likely to drop out (Rumbaut and Ima 1988). Significantly, Khmer girls are viewed as especially prone to leaving school before graduating (Peters 1987). Local-level and ethnographic studies confirm these data, indicating that there are an unusually high number of Khmer, particularly Khmer girls, leaving school. A project developed in 1987 to improve retention of Khmer students in Lowell High School, for example, indicated that in the 1986–87 school year, 15%, or almost one out of every six of the school’s Khmer students, dropped out (Lockwood 1987).¹ The figures were greater among girls than among boys and were highest among the 15-to-18-year-old group.² But Boston-area school counselors and teachers interviewed in the course of this research consistently commented that official school statistics in fact under-represent the actual number of Khmer female drop-outs. They insist, moreover, that such statistics do not begin to reflect the problem of chronic truancy and absence among Khmer girls.³ Khmer parents and community leaders voice a similar concern.

Cambodians began to be resettled in the Boston area in significant numbers in the early 1980s as a part of what is known as the “third wave” of Southeast Asian immigration to the United States (Ebihara 1985). Today there are an estimated 5000 Khmer in Boston and more than 20,000 in the neighboring cities of Lynn, Lowell, Chelsea, Revere, and Lawrence.⁴ Their numbers have grown in large part because of secondary migration to the area, although the current economic downturn in Massachusetts is beginning to deter additional resettlement.

As members of the third and most recent wave of Southeast Asian migrants, the great majority of Boston-area Khmer share a rural background and have experienced little formal schooling. Many have less than a grade school education; most rural Khmer women over the age of 40 are illiterate in their native language. As a result of their recent arrival, their low levels of education, and their relative lack of English-language skills, many of these Khmer are receiving some form of gov-
ernment assistance and live in dilapidated public housing in poor and crime-ridden urban neighborhoods. By contrast, the small number of middle-class Khmer who have settled in eastern Massachusetts have, for the most part, quickly migrated to outlying suburbs where housing prices are more reasonable, neighborhoods are safer, and schools are more effective.

**Khmer Educational Attitudes**

From September 1988 to December 1990, I conducted 125 in-depth interviews with elders, youths, and leaders in the metropolitan Boston Khmer community. Initial interviews were conducted with parents and family members of students enrolled in a bilingual school program. Using a snowball technique, I then interviewed friends, neighbors, and more distant relatives of these families. These interviews took the form of open-ended conversations in which interviewees were encouraged to comment on a wide range of topics. At some point, however, all the discussions turned to topics of education and socialization, and informants were asked to compare their socialization and education in Cambodia with comparable processes in the United States. Parents were also invited to discuss their hopes and plans for the future and the aspirations they hold for their children. Interviewees who were too young to recall events in Cambodia were asked to discuss their experiences in American schools, their understanding of their parents' and elders' expectations, and their own hopes and aspirations. Additional interviews were conducted with teachers and social service providers who work with Khmer in metropolitan Boston. All interviews were taped, transcribed, and annotated. They were conducted in either Khmer or English, depending on the language preference of the interviewee. (Most interviewees, even many younger people, chose to be interviewed in Khmer.) In addition to the interviews, I conducted numerous informal discussions and participant-observations of family interactions, religious celebrations, and school and community events over the 30-month period of research.

Interviews revealed that, although parents have a limited educational background, they are aware of the importance of education and are deeply concerned that their children get a good education in their new homeland. The commitment of these Khmer parents to schooling is based on a combination of values, including, most important, a traditional respect for educated persons, particularly teachers, and the belief that the educated are in some sense both intellectually and morally superior. Cambodian teachers are revered as knowledgeable people and as role-models for proper behavior. Khmer parents say they "give" (qaoy) their children to the teacher, and they consistently refer to the teacher as a "second mother" or "second father." As surrogate parents and as important moral models, ethnic Khmer teachers are often called on by community members to advise adults and children alike.
Parents also have a pragmatic appreciation of the importance of education and its critical role in their children's eventual attainment of secure, long-term employment. They express the hope that with education their children will have better job opportunities in this country than they themselves have had because of their own limited schooling. Khmer youth say that the admonition to stay in school is a constant refrain from parents and regularly complain that their parents are "so strict" (khaiic nah) with regard to schooling. This assessment is supported by teachers who report that they hesitate to notify parents of children who skip school or behave badly in class because they are often dealt with quite severely. For their part, parents say that they expect teachers to use physical punishment if their children do not behave properly in school: "the teacher would not hit my child if he did not do something wrong."

At the same time, parents also admit that they have little understanding of the educational system in the United States and say that they feel they can do little to help their children do well in school because of their own lack of English skills. Parents report that they rarely attend school meetings, typically do not assist their children with homework, and are not involved in school activities. The most common attitude among these parents is that in turning over their children to the school, they have done their part; the rest is up to the teacher and the individual child. The lack of direct parental involvement in children's schooling is supported by an important cultural focus on the autonomy of the individual, and by the belief that children come into the world with inherent talents and predispositions and cannot be pushed far from their intended trajectory (Smith-Hefner 1990). When asked about efforts to assist their children academically, parents typically responded that the teacher is responsible for all academic instruction, while responsibility for learning ultimately lies with the individual child.

Despite this largely non-interventionist approach to the schooling of their children (cf. Gibson and Bhachu 1991), Khmer parents are nonetheless deeply concerned about their children's upbringing and are especially worried about the far-reaching cultural changes taking place in their communities. Drugs, gangs, and the recent increase in violence within the Khmer community are topics of animated discussion and debate. Nowhere, however, is the discussion livelier and the concern greater than with regard to gender roles; nowhere, too, are changes occurring more quickly or dramatically.

Within Khmer culture, there is a strong double standard used in the evaluation of male and female behavior. In popular opinion, for example, Khmer women are blamed in virtually all cases of sexual misconduct and are said to "lose their value" as a consequence of improper action; Khmer men, by contrast, remain untainted. This double standard is clearly stated in the common Khmer saying: setrei tae tleaq knong poq ceroam sequoi procreya khyal; ay menuh proh winy tleaq knong poq ceroam,
douc cie mie niw poa dodael (a girl who falls in the filth smells against the wind; a boy who falls in the filth is like gold, its color remains). Because the consequences of improper behavior are less onerous for males, the weight of maintaining proper gender relations falls most consistently and heavily on Khmer females.

For Khmer parents, two issues are of paramount concern for their daughters. First, it is imperative that a girl remain a virgin until she marries. Second, it is critically important that her wedding be arranged by her parents rather than by the girl and the boy themselves (see also Ledgerwood 1990). Although parents recognize the value of education for their children, these and other traditional ideals concerning the proper role of young women continue to inform parental attitudes toward their daughters’ education. These same role expectations form the basis for intergenerational conflicts concerning the education of Khmer girls in the United States and strongly influence the direction and duration of girls’ schooling. Although largely noninterventionist with regard to their children’s education, Khmer parents do not hesitate to act when a child’s behavior is perceived as threatening the family’s “face” (muq moat) or reputation.

The Education of Women in Cambodia

Khmer parents and elders continue to evaluate the behavior of young women today against the backdrop of their own experiences growing up in Cambodia, where the widespread education of women is a relatively recent phenomenon. Historically, Cambodian education was linked to Theravada Buddhism and the Buddhist monkhood, an association that has continued to this day. Since the 13th century, Theravada Buddhist monasteries have functioned as centers of religious instruction, with monks serving as teachers (Steinberg 1959; Whitaker 1973; Chandler 1983). Until fairly recently, the majority of young Khmer men entered the monkhood for at least a short period of time, usually a month or two. Temporary monastic service was regarded as a way for a son to acquire merit, and, in so doing, to transfer some of its benefit to his father and mother, thus repaying his debt to his parents (Steinberg 1959; Tambiah 1970). An important consequence of monastic service was that it exposed men to literacy and education. Those who stayed in the monastery for a period of several years learned to read and recite Pali, the language of Theravada Buddhism, in order to study Buddhist texts (Kalab 1976). Girls, by contrast, were barred from monastic life. In Cambodia, as in neighboring Thailand, there was no system of Buddhist nunneries like that seen in some Mahayana Buddhist countries (cf. Van Esterik 1982). As a result, the vast majority of women in premodern Cambodia received no formal education.

In 1917 the French set up a uniform system of education throughout Indochina (Ouk et al. 1988:30). French was the language of instruction, and the curriculum was modeled on that used in France. These “French
schools” (as older Khmer still call them) were, however, largely confined to large towns and cities. Despite laws that made education compulsory for children between the ages of 6 and 12, many youths did not attend because of widespread ambivalence among Khmer toward their colonizers (Whitaker 1973:110; Ouk et al. 1988:30). The majority of Khmer boys continued to receive their education in monasteries and temple schools. For the majority of girls, however, opportunities for formal education were still extremely limited, since girls did not have access to monastic education.

Education in Franco-Cambodian schools was quite rigorous; few students managed to pass the required exams, and many could not afford to continue to their classe terminale (grade 13). One consequence of the system was the creation of new criteria for status hierarchy in Khmer society, whereby a small, educated, and somewhat Europeanized portion of the population was distinguished from the uneducated majority (Steinberg 1959; Vickery 1984). The legacy of this system is evident in the small number of Khmer who managed to obtain a high school diploma in the period before World War II. In 1939 only 4 Cambodians had graduated from high school. By 1941, there were only 537 secondary school graduates from a total population of nearly 3 million people (Strand and Jones 1985:22; see also Chandler 1983:164).

After Cambodia won its independence from France in 1953, the national education system developed rapidly, as the government built public schools in cities and, to a less consistent degree, rural areas. Monastery and temple schools were also given a new lease on life under new government programs. “Renovated” temple schools adopted the same curriculum as national public schools, although monks continued to provide instruction, and Buddhist elements of the temple school program were otherwise retained (Ouk et al. 1988:31). Meanwhile, public-school instruction was still largely based on a French model. French language instruction was provided beginning in the second grade. The policy was to progressively restrict the use of Khmer after the first grade so that by the time students passed into high school most, or even all, of their instruction was in French.

In principle, national independence offered the promise of genuine educational change for Khmer girls. Public schools and, for the first time, the renovated temple schools were opened to girls of all social backgrounds (Ouk et al. 1988:31). However, despite this policy change, in many rural areas temple schools remained the only source of schooling. As a result, few girls in these areas received more than two or three years of education; many received none.

Educational change did eventually come to popular Khmer society. In the 1960s the government began a campaign of “Khmerization” of the educational system, and by the end of the 1960s, government statistics indicate that 70% of Khmer children between the ages of 6 and 12 were receiving public education (Whitaker 1973:112). Despite these impres-
sive gains, however, girls' representation in school was still significantly less than that of boys. In 1964 only 32.8% of Cambodian schoolchildren were female. In secondary education, female participation declined to 21.7% of the school population; in higher education women comprised only 10.8% of the student population (Ministry of Information 1965). In 1970, the last year before the war for which there are accurate statistics, girls' enrollment in grade school was a full 70% of that of boys. But by the sixth year of primary school male enrollment was still four times that of girls (Whitaker 1973:112). In other words, in prewar Cambodia, girls dropped out of school at a rate far higher than boys.7

The social consequences of these educational patterns are still evident among Khmer refugees in the United States. In an initial survey of some 100 Boston-area Khmer parents and grandparents of school-aged children (Smith-Hefner 1990), men were found to have had an average of six years of education. Much of it had occurred in village temple schools or in the monastery during temporary monkhood. Eighty-one percent of these men reported at least some ability to read and write Khmer. Women, by comparison, averaged only three years of schooling; only half were literate in their native language. Even among literate women, some had not attended school at all as children. They learned to read and write only as adults during Cambodia's national literacy campaign (1964–70), or in refugee camps before coming to the United States.

Gender and Tradition

Interviews and life histories of Khmer parents indicate that this pre-migration pattern of low educational achievement among women is related to broader patterns of status hierarchy in Khmer society. In pre-contemporary Cambodia, social hierarchy and status inequality were considered integral or natural parts of the social order (cf. Steinberg 1959). Some better-educated and high-status Khmer link this aspect of Khmer social ideology to Cambodia's earlier Brahmanic tradition of hierarchy and family authority (see Keyes 1977:68), elements of which still play a role in Khmer tradition. In line with this tendency to rank all relationships, women were traditionally regarded as the status inferiors of men.

Numerous aphorisms and popular sayings invoke this image of gender hierarchy. For example, refugees often comment that women are "soft and weak" (tuen khesayi), whereas men are "strong and powerful" (klang pukai). In a similar fashion, the father is said to deserve more respect than the mother because "he gives more as the family provider" and "because he has more strength and knowledge." From early on in their socialization, then, children are instructed by their mother to accord the father special respect, greeting and addressing him, for example, in more elevated speech forms. This was true in Cambodia and remains the case in most Khmer families today.
Khmer fathers are warmly affectionate with the young. However, as their children grow older, fathers typically begin to act less indulgent and become more reserved and judgmental. As is the case among other Southeast Asian groups (Geertz 1961; Smith-Hefner 1988), this pattern of paternal distancing becomes most noticeable between the child’s fifth and eighth birthday, at which time fathers ideally no longer demonstrate affection for their children. Khmer themselves take note of the change, observing that it is necessary so as to ensure an attitude of “respectful fear” (kläic) on the part of children toward the father, and to guard against the child’s becoming “spoiled.” Mothers, by contrast, remain a more warm and constant presence. Although Khmer often comment, “If children know you love them, they will misbehave,” mothers, unlike fathers, are thought unable to restrain their affection for their children. Inevitably, “children always know their mother loves them.”

This same deference toward paternal and patriarchal authority is impressed on the marital relationship. Ritual specialists (who still play a role in Khmer marriage ceremonies in the United States) report that in Cambodia brides were instructed to defer to their husbands as head of the household. During the marriage ceremony they were reminded never to look down on their husband, but to always uphold his face/status (kom meel ngoiyei pdey, leeq keteyueh pdey). These words of advice are still repeated to the bride by older guests during the ritual “tying of the hands,” when good wishes and blessings are offered to the newlyweds. The spousal relationship is to a significant, and explicit, degree modeled on that of elder and younger siblings. Even today in the United States, Khmer wives continue to call their husband “older brother” (boong). In return, they are called “younger sister” (qon), regardless of their relative ages. Their behavior is supposed to resemble that of a younger person to an elder, the younger deferring to the greater wisdom and authority of the one who “saw the sun rise first.”

This asymmetrical and hierarchical view of gender relations, however, works in conjunction with another view, not entirely consistent with the first, which affirms that men’s and women’s roles are not hierarchical, but complementary—a pattern found in other areas of Southeast Asia as well (Errington 1990; Jay 1969; Khaing 1984; Mueke 1981). This concept of spousal relationships is evident, for example, in refugees’ statements as to the traditional domains of men and women. Women are said to manage and control “everything inside the house,” whereas men are expected to deal with “everything outside of the house.” Men generally avoid interfering in the domestic sphere, leaving household responsibilities to women. In this regard, men report nostalgically that, in Cambodia, “one man could work and support his whole (extended) family,” whereas women rarely worked at jobs that took them far from home or kept them from performing their household duties.

One consequence of this complementary conceptualization of gender roles was that in Cambodia, within the household and even in petty
trade and marketing, Khmer men easily and readily deferred to the practical authority of women (Ebihara 1974). Regarded as more competent handlers of money than men, who were and are considered prone to waste money in gambling and drinking, women in Cambodia traditionally controlled the household budget. Husbands surrendered wages to their wives, who then took care of household expenditures, a pattern still followed in most Khmer households in the United States.

Not surprisingly, images of gender complementarity and female power often stand in ambivalent tension with the more hierarchical model of male and female. This ambivalence is a recurring theme in the commentaries of refugees. For example, one young woman (age 28) offered the following account of her grandfather’s analysis of Khmer gender roles as “imbalanced complementarity,” which he had used to justify forbidding her mother and aunt to continue their schooling in Cambodia.

I remember him saying that the man is like the right hand and the woman is like the left. They must cooperate, work together. But, he said, you know, the right hand is much more important. You can do many more things with your right hand than with your left. Many things, if you tried to carry them in your left hand, you couldn’t. The right hand is a lot stronger.

She went on to say that her grandfather had insisted that, whereas boys had to be strong and well educated to provide for their families, women only marry and stay home to care for the children; hence, they had little need for formal education. Other women reported that the popular Khmer view that a woman’s domain pertains to “everything in the house,” whereas a man’s has to do with “everything outside,” really meant that schooling was considered to be inappropriate for women, since it took them out into the public sphere.

Some Khmer women who had been denied access to schooling in Cambodia, however, stressed that they were needed at home, especially in poorer families. From an early age, these women assumed major household responsibilities, freeing their mothers to work in the fields or to open a small housefront store, “so that the family could survive.” The value of a daughter’s contribution to the household is expressed by the often cited Khmer phrase, “the daughter replaces the mother” (kaen srey cunnueh dai cuung mdaay, literally, “the daughter replaces the mother’s hands and legs”). In many women’s life histories, when parents fell ill or died, young girls “replaced their mothers in fact,” thereby ceasing their education at an early age.

Education and Socialization

Although not regarded as the status equals of men, Khmer women were valued because of the important role they played within the household. Through their actions as housekeepers and virtuous wives, women were capable of augmenting the status or “face” of the men of
the household. The converse, however, was also true: a woman could ruin or undermine a man's status through her actions within or outside the home. This element of gender tension is a theme that runs through many refugees' accounts of life in Cambodia and is the basis of much of the generational tension experienced by Khmer families in the United States.

Older women, those in their fifties and sixties, recount with some amusement that their mothers did not want them to attend school for fear they would learn to write and pass love letters to boys. Since the appropriate road to marriage is through the initiative of a boy and his parents, it was considered inappropriate for a girl to be directly involved in the engagement process. The proper role of a girl in the matter was simply to agree or disagree once arrangements had been made. Moreover, even in this matter, the actual discretion of the girl was often limited. If parents deemed the engagement proper, the ideal response of a young girl was to accede with the comment, sraic tae mae qaeng, "It's up to you, mother." That young girls might meet boys at school and become romantically involved, circumventing their elders' role in marriage arrangements, was an anxious concern of parents, especially because it raised the possibility of a family's loss of face.

"Face" (muq moat) is a critical concept for Khmer. Someone who has face is commonly said to mien muq (mien) moat, "to have face, to have voice," or to mien muq kpueh, "to have a 'high' face, to be highly respected." The family or individual who has lost face is described as qaat mien muq moat, being "without face and voice," or baq muq, baq moat, "having a shattered face." As among other Southeast Asian groups, face is not a uniquely individual matter, but a complex social evaluation dependent on the judgments of other people in the community and public expressions of those judgments in ritual and etiquette. Given the ubiquitous concern with face and reputation, appearances and outward behavior are the subject of constant, and sometimes anguish, attention.

In Cambodia, the maintenance of a girl's sexual purity was one of the most important assets for a family's face. As a result, girls were subject to much more thorough social supervision than boys (Steinberg 1959; Ebihara 1974). This supervision intensified as a girl approached puberty. Although she may have enjoyed some liberties roaming about the village as a young child, with the approach of puberty, a girl was required to stay close to home and was barred from going out at all in the evening. For girls attending school, such restrictions sometimes meant an end to their education, especially where continuing might require traveling long distances.

An extreme example of the sheltering of girls was the traditional practice called coul mlup, or "entering the shade." Coul mlup occurred at first menses and involved seclusion of the young girl in a darkened room (Ebihara 1968). This period of seclusion usually lasted from three weeks to three months, but in some cases it was longer. Only a few of
the older women I spoke with had "entered the shade." Only wealthy households, they explained, could manage without a daughter's help and could later afford to put on the ceremony that accompanies the girl's emergence from seclusion. For those who had "entered the shade," however, the memories were still quite vivid. One woman (age 54) recalls:

I stayed in my room for three months. And everyday I had to eat only sesame seed with rice and coconut. I was so bored. I wanted to go out... and to take a bath! My mother put mats up over the door and the windows. It was dark in there, and I prayed the days would be short and the nights would be short. I didn't want to stay in my room. It was so terrible. I was not allowed to do anything. Only at midnight, my mother would come to take me out to have a bath.

The longer a girl stayed in seclusion, the more desirable she became and the greater the bride price she could command.

Although the Khmer do not have lineages or corporate kin groups that extend beyond the family, they do have a tradition of bride price. Typically, the groom's kin negotiate with the bride's to determine the amount of a payment variously known as the tlay pteah, "the price of a house," or tlay tig dah mdaay, "the price of the mother's milk." In rural Cambodia, before the American war, refugees say bride price ranged from $30 to $300 (or the equivalent in goods). This payment is intended to defray the costs of the ceremony that takes place at the home of the bride's family. The greater the bride price, the larger and more elaborate the ritual celebration—and the higher the host family's face.

This concern with family face and "sheltering" young girls from certain "dangerous domains," above all those related to sex and procreation, was a recurrent theme of women's life histories, even those who had not "entered the shade." A common refrain in women's stories of their youth was, "we didn't know anything," "we were too shy," "we didn't say anything." For example, unmarried women were barred from seeing childbirth. Because of fears that knowledge of sex would encourage female promiscuity, most women say they were told nothing of sex before marriage. A few said that the acaad's (ritual specialist's) wife or an elder relative "gave them some advice" on their wedding night. Such advice, say two older women (age 50 and age 60), commonly took the following form:

My older aunt said, "you have to respect your husband, the way he does something. You have to accept the way he does it and just keep quiet."

Like the old people just told me, "you have to stay in the room with him, don't get out from that room and don't yell or anything to shame your family."

The advice given to the bride, in other words, stressed her role in maintaining the honor of her family; it did not impart actual information about the sex act. As a result, women said, some brides became so
frightened on their wedding night that, despite the admonitions of their elders, they ran away and hid with friends or distant relatives.

Since knowledge of dangerous domains was thought to lead to inappropriate behaviors, and since shy reserve (ien kemah) is considered a particularly positive trait in young girls, it is not surprising that in women's accounts of life in Cambodia good girls were described as "not knowing anything." In these accounts, as in the above, girls are shy, sheltered, and ignorant. These qualities were not simply the inadvertent consequence of socialization practices, but characteristics that were highly prized and actively cultivated in unmarried young women.

Memories that adult Khmer have of their lives back in Cambodia are, of course, highly idealized. Not all girls were so timid and shy and "knew nothing." Pregnant brides were not unknown, and girls sometimes ran away with their lovers or refused to marry the man of their parents' choice. Such themes are common in Khmer folklore and literature, as well as in popular songs and modern movies. Nevertheless, adults use such idealized memories of life in Cambodia as the measuring stick against which they judge the behavior of Khmer youth in the United States today, and the ideals sometimes stand in painful contrast with the changing realities adults and youths now confront.

**Women and Education in the United States**

All of the Cambodians I spoke with agreed—if somewhat reluctantly—that circumstances have changed dramatically in the United States and that men's and women's roles cannot remain the same. Virtually all couples now recognize, for example, that in this country it is no longer possible for a single breadwinner to provide for his whole family. To make ends meet, both husband and wife must work. At the same time, at least some Khmer also say they recognize that men should do more around the house. These Khmer report that, in the ideal, everyone pitches in to help the family survive.

Things have changed for young people, too. Parents say that they understand that in this country schooling is important and that both boys and girls need an education to secure a good job for their futures. Free public education is one of the first things mentioned when Khmer are asked what they like about life in the United States. In interviews, parents consistently assert that they hope their children will "go far in education," that they will "go to college." They insist, furthermore, that "there is no difference between boys and girls," that education is of vital importance for both sexes.

Yet, although some values have changed in their new country, others survive and inform parental expectations. Nowhere is this truer than with regard to the behavior of girls. Many Khmer feel very strongly that the continued existence of Khmer identity and culture in the United States is contingent on the purity of Khmer women. Face or *muq moat* and family reputation (*keteyueh niy kruesaa*) are still of paramount impor-
tance and revolve largely around the demeanor and reputation of daughters. This concern was quite graphically expressed by one father who explained that "an unmarried daughter is like spoiled meat [saic sequoi] in the house." It thus becomes imperative to marry off the girl as quickly as possible if there is any possibility of impropriety. According to many refugees, the anxieties surrounding family face have become even more acute in America, because a family's prior status is often unknown, and reputation can be evaluated only on the basis of present actions.

Girls, then, experience with particular force the tension between the remembered world of Cambodia and the practical reality of the United States. There is a clear and often anguishing contrast between what girls are expected to do and what they see their American counterparts doing. Young girls, for example, are still expected to stay close to the house and not to go out without a companion—either a sibling, a cousin, or a girlfriend. Dating is restricted, even forbidden, and adolescent school girls are required to return home immediately after school. To tarry too long is often a source of serious conflict with parents.

Most Khmer girls are also still expected to do a great deal of housework and child care in addition to their schoolwork. It is not uncommon for the eldest daughter to arise by 6 a.m., to pack lunch for her parents, to prepare breakfast for her siblings, and to straighten up the house. If a girl misbehaves or fails to do her chores, her mother reminds her that "nobody will marry you if you act like that."

During marital negotiations, the girl is still commonly "observed" (see p meel) by the boy's family to determine, among other things, if she behaves properly and knows how to cook and keep the house in order. One woman (age 24) comments:

It's changed a little bit here but still as a daughter you can't let your mother go into the kitchen all of the time or the neighbors will laugh at you. . . . It's important for them to see the daughter works hard in the house. Then they say that girl is a good girl, has a good reputation and your mother will hear that and be happy.

Gossip is still a strong deterrent within the community. Adults assume that a boy and a girl left to themselves will have sex, and rumors about a girl seen with a particular boy are sufficient for community members to conclude that the two are having an affair. The girl who is seen "hanging around" is talked about by community members until word of her reputation finally reaches her parents. Teachers complain that young girls merely teased by schoolmates about having a boyfriend may not come to school for a week or more out of embarrassment. Needless to say, for a girl who gets pregnant out of wedlock, continuing school is out of the question once the pregnancy becomes apparent.

Aside from the status consequences of inappropriate behavior and the difficulties it creates for finding a marriage partner, a bad reputation has
economic implications as well. A family who has lost face cannot draw as widely on friends and relatives to attend their daughter’s wedding or other ceremonies they sponsor. Because contributions from guests defray the cost of most ceremonies, and because the cost of such ceremonies regularly runs into the thousands of dollars, the loss of face—Pierre Bourdieu’s (1977) familiar image of “symbolic capital”—can have serious economic repercussions. If a family’s name has been sullied because of a daughter’s misbehavior, the family may be obliged to forgo receipt of a bride price. Since bride price among Khmer in the United States typically averages between $3000 and $6000, the economic consequences of such a disaster are painfully real.

Given these pressures, it is not surprising that the behavior and the reputation of Khmer girls in the United States are a frequent source of tension, sometimes leading to incidents of violence. One father of a young girl told how he discovered at one point that his daughter had a boyfriend. He said he was so ashamed—particularly because he had frequently boasted that his daughter, unlike so many others, was a “good girl” and had no interest in boys—that he beat his daughter until she passed out. When he realized what he had done, he was so distressed at his behavior that he picked up a bottle and broke it over his own head. In another incident, when a young girl’s parents would not allow her to marry the boy she loved, she attempted to kill herself by taking an overdose of prescription drugs found in the family’s medicine cabinet. Unfortunately, incidents like these are by no means uncommon.8

As a further indication of the level of family tensions—often, again, gender-related—many of the Khmer parents I interviewed took the opportunity to ask me about child abuse laws in the United States. Cambodians have heard of parents who have been arrested for hitting their children. Those who come from poor rural backgrounds cannot understand why police and the courts protect a misbehaving child rather than support a parent who is trying to change the child’s ways. One such desperate parent was the father (age 56) of a 17-year-old girl who was reportedly loitering on the streets instead of coming directly home from school.

I want to know the U.S. law between parents and children. Like when parents want to hit their children, what is the law? In Cambodia we discipline children much harder [than in the United States]. In the United States we cannot correct them, that’s why they misbehave so much.

His wife, who was obviously distraught and on the verge of tears, interrupted him:

I am afraid about my children because American culture is very different from Khmer culture. I am very embarrassed to see my daughter go out with other people like that and the Cambodian people see that and say, “Oh that family, this girl belongs to that family,” and I am so ashamed about that.
The example of this family is instructive. The next time I heard about
the daughter, two months later, the parents had arranged a wedding for
her with a boy from out of town. They were obliged to pay for the
wedding costs ($6000) instead of, as is customary, the family of the
groom. The mother said that she had to be honest in the marriage
negotiations and had told the boy’s mother that her daughter had
already withdrawn from a previous marriage arrangement.
Khmer girls still feel strongly constrained to agree to a marriage
arrangement if a parent insists. In this case, too, the girl agreed to the
new engagement, just as she had agreed to the first. Seventeen years old
and in the 10th grade, she dropped out of school to work and save money
to set up a household. However, shortly before the wedding she ran off
with another young man, and several months later they were married.
She was pregnant only two months after the wedding. Any plans to
continue her education have been postponed indefinitely.

Although aggregate figures are hard to come by, my research suggests
that as a result of social pressures to preserve female virtue, Khmer girls
in the United States may actually be marrying at a younger age than was
typical in Cambodia. This tendency is exacerbated by what seems to be
a younger age of menarche for Khmer girls. In a study of Khmer refugee
women in six sites in the United States, Judy Ledgerwood has also
suggested that Khmer women in this country are marrying at a younger
age (Ledgerwood 1990). Whereas in Cambodia, before the war, women
reportedly married between 18 and 21 years of age, (Ebihara 1968, 1974;
Martel 1975), in the United States 16- and 17-year-old brides are not
uncommon. Whether statistically precise or not, there can be no question
that pressures to preserve a girl’s virtue and family name are lowering
marital age among Khmer girls in the face of contrary pressures, such as
higher education, that might elevate it.

Often, as in the above case, the first hint of a girl’s misbehavior results
in a desperate parental effort to arrange the girl’s marriage. Sometimes
the arrangements involve someone other than the (alleged) boyfriend.
In other cases, the boy involved is considered acceptable by the family
and the prospective in-laws negotiate the nuptials. In some cases, the
mere rumor of misbehavior on the part of a friend or relative’s daughter
results in the parents’ efforts to arrange a marriage for their daughter “to
prevent something ugly from happening.”

Because parents believe knowledge about sex encourages promiscui-
ity, few parents talk to their daughters about sex or birth control. Mothers
report that they would be too embarrassed to do so and that their
daughters would not listen anyway. Girls typically learn what they know
from friends, often with distressing results. One teenage woman, the
mother of an infant son, told me that she had been injected with “birth
control medicine” once every three months by the school nurse. When I
expressed my astonishment, she showed me a book in which the injec-
tions were recorded. What she had received were actually standard inoculations against childhood diseases.

Early age of marriage, lack of reliable information on birth control, and the embarrassment that young girls feel talking about sexual subjects result in a pattern of first pregnancies occurring two to six months after marriage.\textsuperscript{10} Although many young girls attend school even after they marry, and although many participate in special programs for pregnant teens (where available), few continue after a baby is born. Most couples cannot afford child care, and securing an income to support a family takes precedence over continuing one's education.

In arranging marriages for their daughters, no parent actually tells his or her daughter to quit school. In fact, a constant refrain from Khmer parents to their children is the importance of staying in school and getting a good education. However, when face considerations and a family's reputation are in jeopardy, educational issues quickly become a secondary concern.

**Conclusion: Autonomy and Emergent Identities**

This ethnographic and life-historical information confirms what sociological surveys have indicated: there is a high incidence of dropout among Khmer girls despite strong parental interest in seeing their daughters educated. The study illuminates some of the sociological and cultural forces behind this pattern: the pressure on girls to conform to traditional gender norms, including the expectation that girls contribute heavily to housework and child care; the intense concern for family face and honor and the central role of female virtue in its maintenance; and, an issue I have mentioned only briefly here, the lack of practical understanding on the part of parents of what the educational process entails and a resultant lack of support for the higher education of daughters, even those who are "good girls" according to community standards and are performing well in school.

Khmer culture, however, is clearly in the midst of far-reaching changes. Thus, the educational patterns I have discussed here should not be taken as a definitive indicator of the potential of Khmer women. The educational success of some women is as instructive as the failure of others.

What is particularly interesting, for example, is that those few Khmer women who are going on and obtaining a higher education seem to be drawing on a distinctive characteristic of mature Khmer women: among mature Khmer women there is, and in fact has long been, a distinct preoccupation with reestablishing an important measure of personal autonomy. As mentioned earlier, the autonomy of the individual is a central theme in Khmer socialization, but it is tempered—particularly in the upbringing of girls—by an equally insistent concern with face. After several years of marriage, however, women typically begin to distance themselves from the shy restraint thought virtuous in young girls. This
more independent attitude is especially true of widows, divorcees, or women in second marriages. Whatever the feminine ideals emphasized in adolescence, mature women commonly display a more independent mien, and even an occasional disregard for men. Khmer involvement with American culture seems to have reinforced this aspiration for personal autonomy among women, including some young women, and it is being used by some to justify the pursuit of unconventional goals, such as higher education or a career. In this way, what might be regarded by some observers as “Americanization” seems in fact to be building on a subterranean theme in Khmer culture and gender relations.

There can be little doubt, however, that gender norms and roles for Khmer women in the United States are both complex and, to an important degree, precariously unfinished. The depth and speed of such change vary somewhat by social class and degree of involvement in the Khmer community. Nonetheless, two interesting trends emerged from my interviews. One is that at least some young women have temporarily renounced marriage and any involvement with men to pursue an education and a career. These women are viewed by other Khmer as somewhat anomalous, but they seem to be accepted so long as they are perceived as seriously committed to their educational and professional goals. Another remarkable trend is that a good number of the young women who drop out of school because of marriage and pregnancy are adamantly that they plan to return to school as soon as the baby is old enough to be cared for by relatives or friends. These women, furthermore, report wanting no more than one or two children (a family size that is considerably smaller than the traditional Cambodian family), citing the expense and difficulty of caring for many children in this country.

I have focused in this article on the role of culture and family organization in Khmer educational achievement. The difficulties that Khmer families face in maintaining their culture in the United States demonstrate, however, that social-structural, or “ecological,” factors have also shaped Khmer educational attitudes. Indeed, the Khmer example illustrates that cultural and social-organizational approaches to problems of education and cultural transmission should not and cannot be separated. As “sociogenetic” theories of culture and enculturation have long emphasized (Berger and Luckman 1966; Bourdieu 1977; Eickelman 1979; Gearing 1973), cultural meanings are not free-floating symbols or disembodied ideas, but values that depend for their social effect on their objectification in social institutions and their internalization by actors in ongoing processes of action and learning. The patterns of gender hierarchy emerging among Khmer in the United States provide a clear illustration of this dynamic truth.

The Khmer example also suggests that we must use caution in making broad generalizations about the performance of minority students. Although, overall, Indochinese students are performing admirably in
American schools (Whitmore et al. 1989), it is important to recognize that there is considerable between-group and in-group variation. In the Khmer case, a key feature of this variation is the relatively high drop-out rate among young girls. The problem is related to patterns of schooling and gender hierarchy that originally took shape in Cambodian society; these same cultural values have now been transplanted to the United States. In some instances, as with family "face" and female virtue, the intensity of preoccupation with these values has actually increased in recent years, as the discrepancy between the remembered world of Cambodia and the lived world of the United States has grown.

Changed circumstances have not only reproduced traditional values, but they have transformed them as well. Nowhere is this process of adjustment more acutely visible than in the domain of gender and family relations. Building on and contesting Khmer gender ideals, some women are redefining their femininity and the nature of the family. In so doing, they may also be sowing the seeds for far-reaching changes in Khmer identity, gender relations, and educational achievement.

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Notes

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1. The Lowell High School project was in fact developed to address the problem of high numbers of both Khmer and Lao drop-outs. The number of Lao students in the school, however, was negligible compared to the number of Khmer (436 Khmer versus 54 Lao). And, although the percentage of drop-outs among the Lao (30%) was double that of the Khmer, among Lao students the retention problem was linked directly to the fact that Lowell High School did not have a Lao program at the time. Lao students reported leaving school out of frustration at the lack of Lao curriculum and teachers who could speak their language (Lockwood 1987). Data for other ethnic groups in Lowell High were not offered, but in a comparable study of San Diego high schools conducted during the 1985–86 school year, the drop-out rate for Vietnamese students was 10.7%, 7% for Lao, and only 4.6% for Hmong. The drop-out rate for Khmer was 13.6%, and for whites in the same study, it was 10% (Rumbaut and Ima 1988:53).
2. Among the 15-to-18-year-old group, 57% percent of those who dropped out were female, and 43% were male. The study, unfortunately, groups both Khmer and Lao students together in these statistics (see Lockwood 1987).

3. A local newspaper reports that young Asian women between the ages of 16 and 20—most of them Khmer—are leaving school and running away at a rate of two per week (Costello 1987).

4. The city of Lowell alone has an estimated 18,000 to 20,000 Khmer (Costello 1989), making it the second largest Khmer community in the United States after Long Beach, California.

5. Following the Thai example, the French also developed a limited number of “modernized” temple schools in the Khmer countryside, which apparently met with greater success (Whitaker 1973:110; Kalab 1976:162).

6. In 1967, Khmer finally replaced French as the language of instruction in public schools. With the exception of six to eight hours of French or English as a foreign language, all subjects were then taught in Khmer. Much of the core curriculum, however, remained the same as that in France and was merely translated into Khmer (Ouk et al. 1988).

7. In 1970, when the American-backed Lon Nol government overthrew Sihanouk and the 1970–75 war began in Cambodia, many schools were closed (Whitaker 1973). Teachers fled the rural areas to be with their families in the city. In urban areas, those teachers who were still available taught double shifts and private classes in the evenings. During the subsequent period of Democratic Kampuchea (1975–79), Pol Pot abolished education totally and many, perhaps the majority, of teachers and other educated Khmer were murdered (Ouk et al. 1988; Vickery 1984). Khmer refugee children experienced considerable disruption in their education as a result of the war, dislocation, and subsequent years spent in Southeast Asian refugee camps.

8. The Boston Globe Magazine has run several prominent stories concerning the incidence of such violence (see, for example, Golden 1991).

9. Again, statistics are hard to come by, but it seems that in rural Cambodia menarche was typically around age 17, and sometimes as late as age 19 (see Ebihara 1974:311). In our interviews, parents reported that their daughters are reaching menarche as early as age 12, and on average between 13 and 14.

10. This is despite the fact that many of these girls, before marrying, were quite adamant about waiting to have a first child until they finished school. Their parents made similar comments regarding the importance of finishing high school before beginning a family.

11. A particularly clear expression of this pattern can be found in the following comments about marriage from an older Khmer woman (age 50+):

When I got married the old people said, “you have to put your husband up high like that and always listen and obey him because he is the head of the family.” I was so afraid of him. I was too shy to talk to him or even to look at him for the first three months of our marriage. We had relations, but I never looked at his face! . . . But after I knew him, after a few years, I would only pretend to listen to him, like that: If he’s right, I follow him, but if he’s wrong, I have to do what I think is right. I just pretend to listen and then do something else.

12. Although the majority of the women in my interviews were from poor and rural backgrounds, the few middle-class Khmer women whom I have met more closely fit the stereotype of the high-achieving “model minority.” These
women are well educated and independent. They include several Khmer bilingual teachers, the head of a Khmer community organization, the organizer of a widows' group, and a woman pursuing her master's in education at Harvard. Some of these women have managed to distance themselves from the social constraints of the Khmer community and subscribe to a distinctly untraditional life-style. Some have even married non-Khmer—Chinese, Vietnamese, or Americans. Others have managed to balance community norms with their own less traditional aspirations by, as they say, "walking a middle path." This may be further evidence of a "bimodal" pattern of achievement among the Khmer (and Lao) middle and lower classes identified by Ruben Rumbaut and Kenji Ima (1988) in their study of Southeast Asian refugees in California.

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