

The Cambodian-Americans of Lowell, Massachusetts:

A Cautionary Tale of New Immigrant and Refugee Political Incorporation

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Introduction

In the parking lot of the Cambodian Mutual Assistance Association of Lowell (CMAA) rests a racing boat. It's the kind of boat you will find on the Merrimack River in Lowell during the annual mid-August Southeast Asian Water Festival. Upon closer

examination one discovers the racing boat is broken into three pieces. It was shipped this way in a container from Cambodia but apparently cannot be put back together to make it river-worthy. On its side, facing Middlesex Street, the words: “A Gift from Prime Minister Hun Sen” is painted in Khmer. To those who oppose Hun Sen’s dictatorial regime and ruling party, the Cambodia Peoples Party (CPP), the presence of the boat is offensive at best and intolerable at worst. The divided boat is an apt metaphor for the recent troubles at the CMAA, which for many years has been symbolic of the meteoric rise of the Cambodian American community of Lowell.

A widely held view among the non-Cambodian citizenry in Lowell and some scholars of immigrant and refugee incorporation in the United States is that relative to other hyphenated Americans, Cambodians have had a remarkably turbulent free encounter with political incorporation. Recent events call this optimistic perspective into question. This article offers a case study of urban change and immigrant and refugee incorporation in one New England mid-sized city. It seeks to show that the Cambodian-American experience with incorporation in Lowell does not differ greatly from what other immigrant and refugee groups have experienced throughout New England and the nation over time. Internal immigrant community struggles over whom will lead key institutions and what direction those institutions should take are common historically.¹ With their substantial population, maturing institutions and clout, the Cambodian community of Lowell has also come under greater scrutiny from local media, foundations and academia. Conflicts that might have escaped the public’s attention in the past are

¹ *E Pluribus Unum?: Contemporary and Historical Perspectives on Immigrant Political Incorporations*, edited by Gary Gerstle and John Mollenkopf, Russell Sage Foundation, NY. 2001.

now front-page news. The time is ripe for a reevaluation of the Cambodian Americans' integration in Lowell.

In addition, transnational issues, such as the interjection of Cambodia homeland politics into local affairs, until recently have been little talked about in the community and has been little studied. Nevertheless, Cambodia politics continues to disunite the community and clearly abetted the deterioration of the CMAA.

Incorporation Theory

Lawrence Fuchs has argued that the successful incorporation of immigrants has followed three stages of development. First came the formation of religious and fraternal organizations as well as mutual assistance associations, who took care of the immigrants' multitude of initial welfare needs. Churches, newspapers, radio stations, neighborhood associations, family networks, and burial societies also helped at this step of the process. The second stage saw the formation of organizations that helped with economic development through credit associations, small banks, restaurants and other small businesses to provide jobs and credit for immigrant companies. The third stage in the process was political mobilization via participation in American politics.²

In an article on the political incorporation of Cambodian-Americans in Lowell, Massachusetts, during the middle 1990s, the author found merit in Fuch's thesis even as he acknowledged the overly cheerful tone of Fuch's pluralist trumpet. I concluded that the incorporation process was well underway in Lowell thanks to an open and welcoming political system and the strivings of Cambodian Americans to overcome internal community strife (such as generational tensions, the lack of experience with democracy

in Cambodia and the traumatic impact of the recent auto-genocide on Cambodian-Americans willingness to trust government and leaders).³ The research findings in Lowell appeared to confirm a previous study by the author on ethnic political succession in the neighborhoods of Brooklyn, New York during the first half of the twentieth century.⁴

This article calls into question the pluralist theoretical assumption of these earlier works and wonders about the inevitability of political incorporation for Cambodian-Americans in Lowell.⁵ The findings of this study may have wider implications for new immigrant incorporation in American cities and towns and particularly places where Cambodians have settled.

Methodology

This study relies on in-depth interviews with Cambodian and non-Cambodian community activists as well as the author's participant observation of community events, through attending organization meetings and cultural performances and celebrations and participating in community associations and electoral campaigns.⁶ Owing to the still

² Lawrence H. Fuchs, *The American Kaleidoscope: Race, Ethnicity and the Civic Culture*, Hanover: University Press of New England 1990, p. 340 - 358

³ "Cambodian Political Succession in Lowell, MA." *New England Journal of Public Policy* (Vol. 13, No. 2, Spring/Summer 1998).

⁴ In that doctoral thesis I argued that rapid demographic change, decentralized and competitive political parties, competition for the ethnic vote, reapportionment of state districts and foresighted ethnic leaders all contributed to a relatively smooth succession for various ethnic groups in New York City's political system. *Building the Brooklyn Machine: Irish, Jewish, and Black Political Succession in Central Brooklyn, 1919-1964*. Jeffrey N. Gerson. Ph.D. Dissertation, City University of New York Graduate School and University Center, 1990.

⁵ The author's own history of Latinos in the city of Lowell challenges the more confident pluralist theory of ethnic group incorporation. *A History of Latinos in Lowell, Massachusetts* (forthcoming). See "Latino Migration, the Catholic Church and Political Division: Lowell," by Jeffrey Gerson, in *Latino Political Representation in Massachusetts: Struggles, Strategies and Prospects*, edited by Jeffrey Gerson and Carol Hardy-Fanta. Routledge (2002).

⁶ Prior to the start of this research project I was invited to serve on the CMAA Advisory Board. I accepted the invitation but the Board has not been active over the last six months.

heated nature of the various controversies swirling around the Cambodian community of Lowell, the author has granted anonymity to many interviewees to protect their privacy and to build a relationship of trust between the author and speaker. To further convince the interviewees of the author's sincerity, they were granted the opportunity to listen to their interview on cassette tape and read the transcript to edit the document as they saw fit to further protect their privacy. Several of the key activists were interviewed more than once, in an atmosphere that provided them the greatest opportunity to be frank, such as their home or work place during non-working hours. I am grateful for their willingness to share their time.

The City of Lowell: History and Context

Lowell was founded in 1826 on the banks of the Merrimack River in what was farmland in the town of Chelmsford by a group of industrialists, known as the Boston Associates, led by Francis Cabot Lowell. The same capitalists who founded Lowell also built many of the mill towns on the Merrimack, including Manchester, New Hampshire.

Lowell's original mill workers were girls, farmer's daughters who went to the mills for good wages and a supposed civilized way of living. Cabot Lowell's vision of the American factory sought to avoid what he saw as the immoral English mill system that exploited its workers. However, shortly after Lowell was created, mill competition in the 1830s and 1840s led owners to speed up production and cut wages. The girls soon after, in a series of historically famous strikes, protested their working conditions and by the 1850s started to leave the mills.

By the time these same industrialists created other industrial cities on the Merrimack, they had thrown their idealism away and exploited the immigrant workers without shame. Fortunately for the mill owners (but not for the workers), two things

occurred in the 1850s and 1860s: newly arrived Irish famine immigrants needed work despite the low wages and poor working conditions and the civil war increased demand for cotton and wool products.

The exploitation of immigrant workers on the Merrimack during the nineteenth and twentieth centuries led to the famous “Bread and Roses” strike of 1912 in Lawrence, Massachusetts. Little known but equally important, Lowell’s mill workers carried on a strike in the months after Bread and Roses in part to show worker solidarity but also to protest their own terrible working conditions. The Lowell strike was known for its ethnic solidarity as the mill owners attempted to break the strike with Greek immigrant workers, but the Greeks refused to replace Yankee, Irish and Franco American laborers at the factories. The victory of labor was short-lived in Lowell and Lawrence, as mill owners either retaliated by firing workers (Lawrence) or closed their mills and moved to labor union free Southern states (Lowell).

By the late 1960s and early 1970s, Lowell was clearly a post-industrial city. Most textile and shoe factories were out of business and those that remained depended upon paying the city’s newest migrants, comprised mostly of Puerto Ricans, low wages to keep them afloat. These remaining businesses were staunchly anti-union and fought labor’s efforts to bring textile unions back to the city.

By all accounts, Lowell hit rock bottom during the urban fiscal crisis years of the mid 1970s. In 1975 Lowell’s unemployment rate was 13%, one of the highest in the nation. The median family income fell four percent below the national average. Lowell also lost population from the 1920s through the 1970s, about one fifth of its population (from 120,000 to 90,000). Lowell’s downtown had high vacancy rates and abandonment. Political leaders and residents lost confidence in the city and felt hopeless about the

future. Blame for the city's ills was heaped on the newest immigrants -- Latinos -- who were and still are viewed as lazy, welfare dependent, criminals and complainers who do not try to improve their lot or that of the city's.

A great demographic change occurred in Lowell after 1980 when thousands more Latinos from Puerto Rico, the Dominican Republic and Colombia and thousands of Southeast Asians, (80 per cent of whom are Cambodian) either migrated or were resettled in the city.

Good economic fortune, astute political leadership and timely infusions of federal and state aid, made the incorporation of Southeast Asians in the 1980s and 1990s easier and smoother than it had been for Latinos who arrived in the 1960s and 1970s.

Southeast Asians were aided by a short economic miracle in the early 1980s. Then United States Senator Paul Tsongas convinced An Wang to build his world headquarters in Lowell. Wang employed thousands of newly resettled Southeast Asians, who were mainly put to work building computer boards. It was work that didn't require English and though low paying, it was work. Though the late 1980s economic crash put an end to the boom at Wang, Prime Computer, and Digital, the boom helped Cambodians when they needed a leg up to get started. Southeast Asians also benefited greatly from many sources of aid: churches and voluntary organizations, as well as the federal and state government. Governor Michael Dukakis and his wife Kitty were especially helpful. They created the MORI, Massachusetts Office of Refugees and Immigrants, which helped establish ethnic Mutual Assistance Associations (MAA) in the mid-1980s. One of the most successful MAAs in the state was the Cambodian Mutual Assistance Association (CMAA) of Lowell.

Cambodians also benefited from the perception amongst old ethnic groups in Lowell who viewed them more positively than Latinos. Despite a high poverty rate, youth gang activity and high use of social services for such health problems as post traumatic stress disorder, Southeast Asians were granted “model minority” status by many in the city. Lowellians no doubt sympathized with the Cambodian genocide experience and as working class descendants of immigrants from Ireland, French Canada, Portugal, Greece and Poland who toiled in Lowell’s factories, identified with their resettlement struggle.

One of the main reasons for Lowell’s rise from the economic doldrums of the post World War II period was due to a new vision for the city from School Superintendent Pat Mogan. Mogan had the foresight to see that Lowell’s assets included the city’s industrial heritage and human story about immigrants and labor embodied in that heritage. He believed if Lowell looked to the past they could unify and energize the city. His idea was to create an historic park that would tell the story of Lowell’s people and industry and provide a theme around which the city could build a new future. The new economic strategy highlighted Lowell’s rich history, including the significance of the canals, the historical value of the mill buildings and the cultural diversity of the population.

Thanks to the work of the late Congressmen Brad Morse and Paul Tsongas, Mogan’s idea was transformed into a National Park. The Lowell National Historic Park was signed into law by President Carter and Congress in 1978. It has created new employment opportunities and industries around the park, especially service and entertainment businesses related to tourism. The Park has turned into a huge boom for the city. From 1978 to 2001, the federal government has pumped nearly \$50 million into Lowell for the Park (and its expansion) alone.

However, Mogan's and the Park's vision of a new kind of tourism that recognized ethnic heritage was focused on the old ethnics of Lowell. The largest groups in descending order have been for most of the 20th century French Canadian, Irish, Portuguese, Yankee and Greek by nationality.⁷

The city's newest immigrants at the time the Park was established, mainly Puerto Ricans and Colombians did not figure in the Park's plans, and only very recently has the Park taken steps to present the Latino and Southeast Asians communities to park visitors.⁸

Lowell's Population Today

The city of Lowell has a population today of 105,167, including 14,734 Latinos and 18,781 Southeast Asians, making up 14% and 18% of the population, respectively, according to the 2000 Census. It needs to be said however that immigrant and refugee community activists argue that these figures represent an undercount, especially the

⁷ The following is a breakdown of Lowellians who had two parents of the same ethnic group in 1980: French-Canadian 13,928; Ireland, 12,556; Portugal 4,769; England 3,833; Greece 3, 472; Poland 2,437; Italy 1, 532. United States Bureau of the Census, 1980 Census of Population and Housing, Census Tracts. Lowell, MASS.-N.H., Standard Metropolitan Statistics Area (Washington, 1983) p. 1-14. In 1990 the figures reflected the increase of Southeast Asians and Latinos in the city during the 1980s: Franco-Canadian, 14, 084, Ireland 12, 094, Asia 10, 564; Hispanic 9,020, Portugal 4,973, Greece 3, 343, Italian 2,487, English 2,430 and Polish 1,879. US Census Summary Tape File 3A ANCESTRY, Persons, Reported Single Ancestry. These figures are cited in Sylvie Pressman's wonderfully researched Ph.D. Dissertation titled: *Etude Comparée De L'Immigration Ancienne Et Récente A Lawrence Et A Lowell, Deux Anciens Centres Textiles Du Massachusetts, 1950 – 1995*. Université De paris-Sorbonne, March 1997.

⁸ The recently remodeled Visitor Center hopes to encourage new immigrant visitors by presenting more contemporary images of the city. Also, the Park would like to see visitors experience the diverse neighborhoods of the city by creating a small section rotating new research about the city's neighborhoods and new cultures. Some of the other changes at the Park that show its greater commitment to the Southeast Asian community in particular is its contributions (financial and planning assistance) to the Southeast Asian Water Festival, co-sponsorship of the Cambodian New Year's Festival and its cooperative agreement to house the Angkor Dance Troupe.

The Park still has a way to go to better represent all the new immigrants and refugees in the City of Lowell. For example, the Working People's Exhibit, which chronicles Lowell's history from its founding in 1826 as a planned industrial to the present day, suddenly and inexplicitly ends its chronology in 1984, offering the visitor no hint of the major demographic shifts that the city has experienced since. For more on the Lowell National Historical Park's struggle to include less affluent and more diverse segments of society in its presentation of public history, see Cathy Stanton's Dissertation Prospectus, "The Lowell Experiment: Public History in a Postindustrial City." Tufts University, Interdisciplinary Doctorate Program, December 1, 2002.

growing undocumented Dominican and Colombian communities as well as the very recent Cambodian immigrants who have overstayed their visas. Additionally, they believe the latest wave of immigrants to Lowell from Brazil (5,000) and Africa (5,000) are not reflected in this total. If we add up all of these language minority groups living in Lowell today the city now has a majority minority population.

Cambodian Migration Milestones in Lowell

The first 160 Cambodian and Laotian refugees were resettled in Lowell starting in October 1979. They were sponsored by the New England Agency for Refugee Resettlement (NEEAR), the Boston chapter of the American Fund for Czechoslovakian Refugees, in collaboration with local churches. Hundreds more were sponsored between 1981 and 1985 but the enormous movement of Southeast Asians to Lowell came after 1985 due to secondary migration.⁹

In the latter half of 1999 the Cambodian-American community of Lowell, Massachusetts, then only twenty years young, appeared to have reached several milestones in the process of immigrant and refugee political incorporation. These achievements were the envy of other new immigrant and refugee groups in Lowell. From an historical and comparative perspective, the Cambodian-American community of Lowell was ahead of its time.

Indeed, there was a lot for both Cambodians and non-Cambodian Lowellians to cheer about in 1999. The Cambodian Mutual Assistance Association of Lowell, Inc.,

⁹ For a discussion of the resettlement from a University of Lowell political science professor who was instrumental in the process, see Hai B. Pho, "Local Politics and the Southeast Asian Resettlement", unpublished paper, 1999. Leslie Anderson. "For Indochinese: a new land." *The Lowell Sun*, July 31, 1980, 10. For more on secondary migration, see Jean Larson Pyle, "Public Policy and Local Economies: The Phenomenon of Secondary Migration." Unpublished paper, 1998.

(CMAA) started in 1984 by local Cambodian community activists, had grown to a \$3.4 million organization. In the same year the CMAA re-located to an old mill building with forty four thousand square feet that had been donated free of charge by the Courier Corporation.¹⁰ Also in late 1999, the CMAA announced plans for the first ever health care center devoted to serving the Southeast Asian community of Lowell. The Metta Health Center, a division of the Lowell Community Health Center, opened its doors in 2000. Today Metta Health is expanding its service to thousands of uninsured patients and boasts a million dollar budget with a growing clinic staff that includes doctors, nurses, social workers, and a Cambodian expert in traditional healing.¹¹

Under the leadership of Samkhann Khoeun, an engineer from Chicago who answered the call to serve as Executive Director from 1995-2002, the CMAA announced plans in 1999 for a vast expansion of the association. As part of Khoeun's broader vision for the future of the Cambodian community of Lowell, the mill building would maintain its social service functions, but would add a new cultural component that includes mixed-income housing, restaurants, shops, a cultural performance center and a Cambodian genocide remembrance museum. Khoeun deeply believes in the value of cultural

¹⁰ One of the members of the family that owns Courier, Michael Conway, has taken a personal interest in the prosperity of the Cambodian community. Conway is owner of Conway Insurance of Lowell and has tried to build his insurance company with Southeast Asian clients. Moreover, Conway is a Republican who has run unsuccessfully for state office. Conway understands that the Cambodian-American vote in Lowell is up for grabs in state and national elections (local elections in the Massachusetts are non-partisan). Michael Conway, interview by author, videotape, June 8, 1998. A fall 2002 count of Asian American registered voters by the author's student, Juergen Heinzler, was 1,300 (up from 690 in 1995). A computation by Paul Watanabe and Michael Liu of the Institute for Asian American Studies was even more generous than Heinzler's: 2,215. Given either figure, if Cambodians were to vote as a bloc they could sway the outcome of elections in the city. Paul Watanabe and Michael Liu, "Asian American Voter Registration in Massachusetts: A Preliminary Report on Ten Cities and Towns." Published by the Institute for Asian American Studies at the University of Massachusetts Boston, July 2002, 3.

¹¹ http://www.bostonphoenix.com/boston/news_features/other_stories/multipage/documents/01683418.htm

development as a means for Cambodian collective healing from the brutal Khmer Rouge regimes' Killing Fields. During their reign from 1975 – 1979, nearly two million Cambodians perished due to murder, starvation, over work and a lack of medical care.¹²

In so many other ways, Cambodian-Americans were outwardly thriving in Lowell. Southeast Asian small businesses continued to grow. A survey by the Asian American Business Association put the number of Southeast Asian small businesses at 110 in 2003, with 90% Cambodian.¹³

In the fall of 1999, a newly formed Asian American Business Association was created, which along with the Cambodian Association of Lowell (CALL), a Community Development Corporation founded in 1993, offered workshops for first time homebuyers and microenterprise training and loan programs for small business owners.¹⁴

By the mid 1990s, the Cambodian community had inaugurated two Buddhist temples, one that served a middle class clientele in the city, and one that was located in

Tinker Ready. April 4, 2003. *Boston Phoenix*. "Healing traditions Americans have only recently begun to experiment with: body work, herbs, acupuncture, and other forms of Oriental medicine. Cambodians have been doing it forever." Sonith Peou, interview by author, tape recording, April 11, 2003.

¹² For a published interview with Samkhann Khoeun, see: Chapter 5. "Samkhann Khoeun: Lowell, Massachusetts, the 'Long Beach of the East Coast'." in *Not Just Victims: Conversations with Cambodian Community Leaders in the United States*, edited by Sucheng Chan, interviews by Audrey U. Kim. Urbana and Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 2003. For a history of the Khmer Rouge and their legacy, see Elizabeth Becker. 1998. *When the War Was over: Cambodia and the Khmer Rouge Revolution*. New York: Public Affairs.

¹³ David Turcotte, consultant to the Asian American Business Association, interview by author, August 12, 2003. A study of Boston Khmer small businesses showed that the overwhelming number of Cambodian owned businesses were owned by ethnic-Chinese Khmer. There is no reason to believe the Lowell Cambodian community is any different. Nancy J. Smith-Hefner, "The Culture of Entrepreneurship among Khmer Refugees," in *New Migrants in the Marketplace* edited by Marilyn Halter, Amherst: University of Massachusetts Press, 1995.

¹⁴ http://www.cambodianamerican.com/about_history.htm

neighboring North Chelmsford, that served a lower income population that practiced animism.¹⁵

Culturally, the year 1999 saw the first ever Southeast Asian Water Festival, co-produced by the CMAA and the University of Massachusetts Lowell's Center for Family, Work and Community, under the leadership of Community Psychology Professor Linda Silka. The Water Festival in 2002 attracted nearly 60,000 people, with its featured Cambodian built racing boats and numerous teams from the community competing throughout the day on the Merrimack River.¹⁶ The Festival has begun to rival the long held Lowell Folk Festival for the city's most well attended event. The CMAA also continued to sponsor a Cambodian New Year celebration, which became successful enough to hold from 2000 - 2002 at the recently built Paul Tsongas Arena. Also flowering in the city's cultural soil's the Cambodian American Angkor Dance Troupe, which has won numerous awards for preserving the ancient dance traditions of Cambodia. The troupe travels the nation and region, with a highlight being its performance in 2001 at the White House.¹⁷ Finally, in 1999 the Cambodian Master Performers Program got off the ground. Maintained by a grant from the Massachusetts Foundation for Humanities, this program was established to support the revival of traditional art forms in Cambodia and inspire contemporary artistic expression through educational courses, recording and finding Master Musicians in Cambodia and caring for them in the United States.¹⁸ Furthermore, the addition of Southeast Asian cultural events helped the Lowell win the coveted All American City competition in 1998.

¹⁵ Animism, which is the oldest religious practice in many Southeast Asian countries, is centered on the belief in a spirit world.

¹⁶ For photos of the festival see: http://www.atask.org/lowell_waterfest.html; For a summary of the Festival's purpose see: http://members.tripod.com/~malaysoned/water_festival.htm

¹⁷ http://www.house.gov/apps/list/press/ma05_meehan/pr_990720.dance.html

¹⁸ http://www.cambodianmasters.org/cmpp_pages/organiz.htm

In the area of youth at risk, gangs and gang violence, Lowell rode the wave of steep decreases in violent crime in the late 1990s. In the year 1999, for example, Lowell did not suffer a single homicide.¹⁹ Lowell's Police Chief Edward Davis won praise from local politicians and fellow officers outside of Lowell, for his enlightened early enthusiasm for community policing. Less favorably received by the police brotherhood was his willingness to openly address racial profiling, which did however win praise from former Attorney General Janet Reno, former Middlesex District Attorney and current Massachusetts Attorney General Tom Reilly, and numerous faculty and staff at the University of Massachusetts Lowell. A Race Relations Council was organized in 1999 under the auspices of the Lowell Police Department, with the assistance of University staff, and it remains in place today with a larger and more diverse group of participants than in 1999.

Perhaps the greatest achievement for the Cambodian-American community came in the fall of 1999 when first time candidate for Lowell City Council, Chanrithy "Rithy" Uong was easily elected one of nine at-large city councilors.²⁰ The victory garnered national, regional and local media coverage, since Uong was only the second Cambodian-American to win election in the United States. The first, Selectman Daniel Lam of Randolph, Massachusetts in 1997, while Cambodian by birth, did not live through the Khmer Rouge years as Rithy Uong had, and as an ethnic Chinese Cambodian more readily identifies as, and is more closely associated with, the Chinese American communities of Randolph and Boston.

¹⁹ "Congratulations Chief Davis", Editorial, May 15, 2002 *The Lowell Sun*, 13.

²⁰ Christopher Scott and Matt Wickenheiser, "Lowell voters make history." November 3, 1999. *The Lowell Sun*, 1, 6, 7.

Rithy's election stunned the Lowell political establishment for several reasons. Not only was he a first time candidate with no previous experience in city politics, but he won in a city whose officers are all elected at-large, rather than in districts. Historically, at-large (versus district based elections) are the hardest for immigrant newcomers to win since they require a candidate to campaign city-wide, raise relatively large sums of money (\$20,000 in this case), and essentially draw most of his or her votes from the non-minority population who make-up the vast majority of city voters. Rithy also fashioned a unique coalition comprised of upper middle class whites, public employee unions, a marvelous confederation of minority groups, namely the Southeast Asians and Latinos, with a generous helping from Lowell High School youth (Rithy is a counselor at Lowell High School) including former gang members.

Rithy won reelection in November 2001 with a much smaller coalition and less energetic campaign. His drop off of a thousand votes from the first campaign speaks to this. Nevertheless, by winning a second term Rithy showed the political establishment in the city that he was not a fly by night politician and would have to be taken seriously as a perennial player in city politics.

Also in 2001 another first time Cambodian-American candidate, Vesna Nuon, ran at-large for Lowell School Committee. Despite running a poor campaign compared to Rithy's 1999 model effort, Nuon nearly won, missing by only several hundred votes. Nuon is once again a candidate for School Committee in 2003.

By the middle to late 1990s, Lowell's experience with Southeast Asians had earned notoriety, praise and support from various circles. At the national level, NBC

with Tom Brokaw covered the resettlement of Cambodians in Lowell²¹ and the United States Commission on Immigration Reform praised Lowell for a relatively smooth ethnic succession compared to other cities they had examined.²² Locally, the Cambodian community received generous assistance from the University of Massachusetts Lowell²³ and Middlesex Community College²⁴, all the while earning a reputation among Lowell's established Greek, Irish and French citizens as a model minority group: hard working, self sacrificing educational achievers.²⁵

In sum, by anyone's measure, at the start of the new millennium, the Cambodian American community of Lowell had made great strides towards their full political, economic, cultural and social incorporation in the Spindle City.

Breakdown at the Cambodian Mutual Assistance Association

In the last two years, the progress of Cambodian-American incorporation in Lowell has been upended. Dramatically, the superficially stable Cambodian Mutual

²¹ The documentary, *To Be an American*, retraced the journey of one Cambodian immigrant family from a Thai refugee camp through their arrival in the United States and settling in Massachusetts and Rhode Island. Produced by Tom Spain and Linda Spain. 1989. Northbrook, Ill: MTI Film and Video.

²² The U.S. Commission on Immigration Reform visited Lowell on October 11, 1994. Commission Chair, Barbara Jordan heard testimony from various community leaders. At the end of their remarks Ms. Jordan thanked the leaders and suggested that Lowell be commended for its efforts to accommodate the Southeast Asian community of Lowell.

²³ One example is the Center for Immigrant and Refugee Leadership Empowerment program, better known as CIRCLE, founded by Dr. Peter Kiang of the University of Massachusetts Boston. CIRCLE was an outstanding leadership development program which assisted the Cambodian and other immigrant communities in Lowell (and Amherst and Boston) during the mid to late 1990s. See "New Voices in University-Community Transformation." *Change* with Joan Arches, Marion Darlington-Hope, Jeffrey Gerson, Joyce Gibson, and Peter Kiang (Vol. 29, No. 1, January/February 1997).

²⁴ Middlesex Community College has received several significant grants over the last dozen years. One of the programs is called SCORE, which was developed in collaboration with the Lowell Public School system and the Office of the Massachusetts Attorney General in response to several violent incidents in the school system. The SCORE Program was developed by Middlesex Community College professor, Ken Dunn. See: <http://www.umass.edu/ipo/old/macienews.html>

²⁵ Several current and past Lowell City Councilors have commented to the author over the last ten years that Cambodians have succeeded in assimilating to American life because they are following in their Lowell ancestor's footsteps whereas the city's Latino population has failed miserably to obtain economic and political power because they have been unwilling to selflessly toil hard in Lowell's schools and workplaces.

Assistance Association of Lowell, Inc., (CMAA), erupted in turmoil in 2002. A once flourishing social service agency is today virtually bankrupt. A deeply divided CMAA Board of Directors unceremoniously fired its Executive Director Samkhann Khoeun.²⁶ It's chief funders, the Theodore Edson Parker Foundation, the Stevens Foundation, the City of Lowell; Commonwealth of Massachusetts and United States Labor Department are holding back their commitments to the agency in light of the disorder at CMAA. Many of the CMAA's workers have been laid off and its largest programs shut down. A recent visit by the author to the CMAA's headquarter revealed no secretary at the front desk, and only two employees working in the cavernous mill building. Phone calls to and from CMAA are impossible due to the Phone Company's suspension of its contract.²⁷

What accounts for this turnaround for the one time model mutual assistance association in the Bay State? There are several reasons for the present predicament. According to former and current Board members, the leadership style of Executive Director Samkhann Khoeun, always a source of tension between the Board and he, was untenable. As most Board members saw it, Khoeun became autocratic in his manner in the preceding years, with some Board members tracing the seeds of the problem to a 1996 conflict between the then Board and Khoeun. At that time the Board had moved to fire Khoeun but the intervention of a group of funders, including the University's Center for Family, Work and Community Director Linda Silka, on Khoeun's behalf, saved his job and unwittingly created an unequal relationship between the Board and the Executive

²⁶ Jason Lefferts. "Cambodian group faces divisions, search for leader." July 28, 2002, p. 1, 8. *The Lowell Sun*.

²⁷ A January 28th headline article in the *Lowell Sun* that was printed after Samkhann Khoeun's dismissal in the late spring of 2002, was particularly damaging to the agency. It reported that \$400,000 of the CMAA's federal funds was unaccounted for. It appears that story was false and was either a case of shoddy journalism or an attempt by the publisher to kick the agency when it was down. One of the CMAA officials wrongly accused in the article has filed a lawsuit for defamation against the authors of the article, as well as the editors and publishers of the *Lowell Sun*.

Director. The funders gave the Board an ultimatum: either they reinstate Khoeun or they would withdraw all of their funding and move their resources to CMAA's main rival, the Cambodian American League of Lowell (CALL). All told, the trials of leadership at CMAA did not begin in 2001 but had deeper roots in the history of the organization. Some local observers believe a reassessment of the twenty year old mutual assistance association, which has controversially been dedicated to serving one immigrant and refugee group rather than the Southeast Asian community as a whole, is long overdue. One long time student of ethnic politics in America, Lawrence Fuchs, has noted the importance of MAAs for the early stages of immigrant and refugee succession, however as the community matures, another kind of organization may be more appropriate.²⁸

The broader subject of CMAA's mission leads to a second reason for its troubles: a difference in philosophy between the Board and the Executive Director. While Khoeun ambitiously hoped to enlarge the activities of the CMAA to include culture and economic development, many on the current Board see these goals as far too grandiose and believe the organization should stick to its original activities, providing the most basic assistance to new immigrants and refugees: English language and citizenship classes, day care for working parents, after-school programs for youth at risk, and a full calendar of events for the elderly (cultural, mental health, religious...etc.). While Khoeun drew up blue prints for the old mill building's expansion, with the help of architects and builders, Board members wondered how CMAA could extend itself and still pay for boiler repairs, a leaky roof, and numerous structural deficiencies inherited by CMAA. It should be said that all of the Board members interviewed for this study admired Khoeun for his energy,

²⁸ See Lawrence Fuchs. 1990. *The American Kaleidoscope: Race, Ethnicity and the Civic Culture*. Middletown, Conn.: Wesleyan University Press.

his commitment and desire to help the war-weary Cambodian people of Lowell but they did not share his sweeping goals for the CMAA.

Another Look at the Mutual Assistance Association

Fuchs argues that immigrants of previous generations as well as those today follow the path toward ethnic Americanization by first forming mutual assistance associations for religious and fraternal solidarity and afterwards, organizations for economic success and political power. These MAAs perform several welfare functions as well as allow the newcomers to express “their sensibilities, protect their interests, or promote some public good through organized activity.” In essence, organizations such as MAAs are a building block towards an immigrant community’s economic and political incorporation and assimilation. In the 1980s and 1990s, the national and state governments embraced MAAs and funded them to carry out these tasks. At the federal level, Congress passed legislation to fund the Office of Refugee Relief²⁹ and many states, like Massachusetts, created offices to form and assist MAAs, such as the Massachusetts Office of Refugees and Immigrants.³⁰

Fuchs and Cohen argue that the latest wave of refugees resettled in the United States during the 1980s and 1990s were better off than previous generations of refugees and immigrants because of the tremendous economic, political and moral support they received from the federal and state government and a host of voluntary agencies.³¹

The recent difficulties at the CMAA raise the question whether the work of an MAA will necessarily speed up the process of incorporation. In fact, at times the

²⁹ US Refugee Act of 1980.

³⁰ Commonwealth of Massachusetts, Executive Order 257 (1985)

³¹ Fuchs, *Ibid.* Knowledge of How to Combine: The Political Socialization of Southeast Asian Refugees in Lowell, Massachusetts, 1984 – 1988, senior Honors Thesis, November 1994 Rdcliffe College.

assistance of federal and state agencies, foundations and universities may harm the process of incorporation that these very institutions purportedly wish to foster. The case of Cambodian Americans in Lowell requires us to rethink the value of MAAs, twenty years into the resettlement process. When has an MAA outlived its usefulness? Might another approach by MAAs be more valuable at this time, which might include integration of services with non-Cambodian dominated agencies? How important is it for MAAs to be ethnic group specific? Might it not be wise for the CMAA to hire non-Cambodian staff and elect non-Cambodians to its Board of Directors, if they are experienced and capable? While the CMAA had prospered from its start in 1986 through 2001, the Laotian MAA, called the Laotian American Organization or LAO, closed its doors through much of that period. Only recently has it been reborn as the extremely fragile Lao Family Mutual Assistance Association headed by Blong Xiong. All of the area's foundations and governments have poured money into the CMAA while funding for the smaller Lao and Vietnamese community, not to mention older Latino immigrants and the most recent immigrants from Brazil and Africa, have been give scant attention (see Parker Foundation report).

The literature on MAAs is thin, especially ones that address the question of their helpfulness or harmfulness to immigrant and refugee political incorporation. The one recent study that does address the question is limited in scope to the Chicago metro area and to South-East Asians and Eastern Europeans who settled there as refugees in the late 1980s.³² The study found that mainstream institutions rather than ethnic organizations improved South East Asians self sufficiency (as indicated by a lower poverty rate, greater and more secure employment...etc). On the other hand, ethnic organizations lessened

East Europeans' dependency on public funds, helped them find jobs and move out of poverty. One of the policy implication is Southeast Asian MAAs need to interweave their activities with those of other powerful local institutions, such as mainstream associations, community organizations, and employers. An example of this in Lowell would be a cooperative venture between the Park and the CMAA on the idea of creating a genocide museum and a Cambodian Cultural Center. The CMAA under Samkhann Khoeun was less flexible, less willing to compromise with mainstream institutions such as the City and the Park. Another policy implication of the Chicago study is that MAA staff and board members need greater instruction as well as resources and power. These proposals are very much relevant to the future of the CMAA in Lowell. Having suffered its worst downturn since inception, it is trying to figure out what kind of organization it should be. One thing is clear, Board members, staff and executive director require greater skills in how an MAA should function. This is particularly the case for the Board of Directors, whose lack of leadership skills were called into question in a Harvard Business School evaluation of the agency in 2000.

Cambodia Homeland Politics Rears Its Divisive Head

Homeland politics, until recently held at bay by local political leaders, fully joined the mix of issues bedeviling and disunifying the CMAA and Cambodian Americans in Lowell starting in 2001. The Lowell National Historic Park's sponsorship of a delegation of Cambodian and non-Cambodian activists and officers to Cambodia in the summer of 2001 came back to haunt the Park and Cambodian community leaders.

³² *Ethnic Communities and ethnic Organizations Reconsidered: South-East Asian and Eastern Europeans in Chicago* by Lorraine Majka and Brendan Mullan, *International Migration*, Vol. 40 (2) 2002.

In the summer of 2001, the Lowell National Historical Park, one of the city's most powerful institutions since its establishment in 1978 helped pay for a "delegation" of Lowell officials, Cambodian and non-Cambodian, to travel to Cambodia to meet with government officials from the ministries of trade, culture and education. There were several purposes for the trip including educating city officials about the history and current condition of Cambodia and the creation of a sister city relationship between Lowell and rural Pursat Province where Lowell City Councilor Rithy Uong had worked as Field Director for a non-governmental organization from 1993-1995. The idea for the trip came from Councilor Uong. The National Park, under the leadership of Superintendent Pat McCrary, supported Uong's plan. The Park's grant to the Parker Foundation to fund the trip was turned down. Rather than let the idea pass away the Park picked up the tab for the trip.

The trip was accorded unprecedented attention by the city's English language newspaper, the Lowell Sun, a long time power broker in city politics. The Sun sent a reporter along who chronicled the delegation's daily activities for its readers.

The Delegation Returns From Cambodia

Upon returning from Cambodia criticism of the delegation's trip was heard from the city, Lowell Sun as well as Cambodian community leaders. What chiefly distressed some Cambodian-Americans who are active in Cambodia party politics in Lowell was the delegations' meetings with officials of Prime Minister Hun Sen's government and an hour meeting with Hun Sen himself. A supposed scheduled meeting with opposition

party leaders never materialized for unexplained reasons.³³ Lowell's Cambodian leaders who journeyed to Cambodia, namely Samkhann Khoeun of CMAA, City Councilor Rithy Uong, and CALL Executive Director Ratha Yem, also were criticized, Cambodian style, on the quiet. For Khoeun especially, this would not be the last time Cambodia politics filtered into CMAA affairs. Overall, the fact that there has been no follow-up on the 2001 trip to date only confirms to some non-Cambodian and Cambodian what critics charged then, that the trip was at best an ill planned junket for city and state officials, and at worse, had done long term damage to the CMAA's credibility in the local Cambodian community.

In 1999, Bunrith Lach became the President of the CMAA Board of Directors. Lach is a Lowell businessman who owns the landmark Pailin Plaza, which contains the most distinctive Cambodian commercial strip in Lowell. The Plaza encompasses a supermarket, restaurant, fashion clothing store, video store, dental office, hair stylist, and jewelry store.³⁴ Lach is considered by some community activists to be affiliated with the local Cambodia People's Party or CPP, which is the ruling party in Hun Sen's government. Lach denies this and cites his contacts with members of all three major parties in Cambodia.³⁵ The development of a close relationship between Khoeun and Lach, as Khoeun was coming under greater criticism from the Board of CMAA, was enough for some to declare Khoeun guilty by association. Board members who sought

³³ Hun Sen is a dictator who during July 4-7, 1997, staged a coup that resulted in the murders of Cambodian co-premier Prince Norodom Ranariddh's top party officials and prevented Prince Ranariddh from taking power following Ranariddh's UN supervised election victory. Additionally, Hun Sen made a devil's bargain with the remaining Khmer Rouge leaders, bringing them into his governing coalition in exchange for their freedom from trial and allowing the remaining Khmer Rouge loyalists control over the countries western lands, including its precious diamonds and rubber plantations.

³⁴ Mark Friedman. "The Development of Lowell's Pailin Plaza." *The Bayon Business News*. April, 1999. Note: The Bayon Business News is a monthly publication of CALL.

³⁵ Bunrith Lach, interview by author, via telephone, August 10, 2003.

Khoeun's resignation point to specific instances where the Khoeun-Lach alliance crossed a line of propriety and brought homeland politics on a collision course with the local mission of the CMAA.

Some in the community believe it was Lach's close ties to Hun Sen (Lach's brother is married to the niece of Ambassador Ouch Borith, who is the Permanent Representative of the Kingdom of Cambodia to the United Nations; Lach and Borith are close friends), that account for Prime Minister Hun Sen's personal gift of the racing boat to the Cambodian community of Lowell for last year's Southeast Asian Water Festival. Moreover, Lach was part of the delegation that went to Cambodia and was responsible for organizing the delegation's meetings with government officials, leaving out any possible meeting with government opposition parties.

A second outstanding flap that sticks in the throats of Cambodians was Samkhang Khoeun and Bunrith Lach's CMAA backed January 8, 2000 "Millennium Celebration". It was not lost on Cambodians that January 7 is an anniversary celebrated in Phnom Penh, the capital, by Hun Sen's CPP but is viewed suspiciously by Cambodians in the United States. January 7, 1979 is the date that Vietnamese troops invaded Cambodia and forced Pol Pot and the Khmer Rouge to flee from power. Vietnamese armed forces occupied Phnom Penh and remained in control of Cambodia until 1989.³⁶ To many Cambodians, especially those from Eastern Cambodia and the region now under Vietnamese control but historically part of the Kingdom of Cambodia, known as Khmer Krom, this date cannot be celebrated due to the ancient rivalry that festers between Cambodians and Vietnamese. Khoeun's faultfinders hold that he should have been aware of the

³⁶ <http://www.isop.ucla.edu/eas/thisweek/01-07.htm>

For a discussion of both sides on this issue see: By Ronnie Yimsut. 2001. "Vietnam: Was It Liberation or Invasion?" <http://www.mekong.net/cambodia/jan7.htm>

significance of the date and not allowed such an affair into the halls of the CMAA. Lastly, for critics of the ruling party, the fact that Ouch Borith, Cambodian Ambassador to the United Nations, was in attendance added insult to injury,

Further evidence that homeland party politics is firmly lodged at CMAA today is the fact that a number of the newly elected CMAA Board members are also members of Cambodia's chief opposition and reform party, known as the Sam Rainsy Party.³⁷ No doubt their dismay with what they viewed as CMAA's flirtation with the CPP led several San Rainsy Party backers to run for a Board of Director's position in October 2002.

³⁷ The most recent election in November 2002 saw the highest voter turnout ever, 400, along with the highest number of candidates, 30, vying for 5 open positions. This speaks to the importance and contentiousness of the issues discussed above.

Conclusion

Still to be developed is the Conclusion which will include:

- parallels between this story and other papers in the volume. For example, Halter's piece on tourism (see below).

Immigrants as Producers of Tourist Attractions

As Marilyn Halter points out in her article in this volume, many cities around the nation have come to realize the value of ethnic tourism. Lowell however has been slow to embrace the concept for its newest immigrants. While the City gives much support, through staffing and funding, to the annual Winterfest and the Lowell Folk Festival, it provides relatively little assistance to the annual Puerto Rican Festival (in fact, relations between the Festival organizers and the city is downright hostile) and the annual Southeast Asian Water Festival and Cambodian New Year celebrations. The Water Festival in particular has been recognized as a major tourist attraction for the city and yet Lowell has not moved to embrace the extravaganza, according to one of the event's co-founders and annual organizers, Samkhann Khoeum.³⁸

In fact, the entire vision for Lowell's economic development as prepared by the late Senator Paul Tsongas was to develop site along the Merrimack River, purposely looking away from the city's traditional neighborhood of first settlement, known as the Acre. According to one of Tsongas's lieutenants, Jim Cook, the President of the Lowell

³⁸ Jason Lefferts of the Lowell Sun writes: "The city's Southeast Asian Water Festival is a one-day event, but in seven years it has turned into a weekend or even week-long vacation attraction and has even lured new residents into the city.. Planners say visitors come from California, Cambodia, France and other far-off areas..." July 26, 2003, The Lowell Sun, p. 1, 8.

Plan (Tsongas' version of a Chamber of Commerce), Tsongas hoped to create a "Harvard Square" on the Merrimack, complete with outdoor musicians and street performers, national brand chain stores, such as The Gap, while maintaining the look and feel of the old mill buildings. The buildings of course would no longer house factories, instead they would hold the University of Massachusetts Lowell's Education School, Senior Housing, and market rate housing, plus restaurants and shops.

Even the notion of organized tours of ethnic neighborhoods never took off in Lowell, though a walking tour brochure of the Acre is under construction by the National Park. If anything, the Acre, still a working class Latino and Southeast Asian immigrant community, is something to be shunned by the thousands of suburban tourists who visit the city's river attractions already in place, the Paul Tsongas Arena, primarily home to an American League Hockey franchise and the University of Massachusetts Lowell River Hawk hockey team, and the Edward LeLachur Ball Park, home to the NY Penn League Lowell Spinners. Neither team attracts Latinos or Southeast Asians nor have they made any great effort to do so. Even the concession stands at both parks, a perfect opportunity to allow small businesses to sell their wares, including food, artwork, music..etc., ignore the city's latest immigrants.

In fact, the CMAA's decision to hold the Cambodian New Year's Celebration at the Tsongas Arena (200-2002) was in part due to the fact that Cambodians rarely attend events at the Tsongas Arena and the CMAA hoped to bring community residents to a part of the city that they usually do not feel welcome at.³⁹

³⁹ Samkhann Khoeun, interview by author, tape cassette recording, April, 8, 2003.