

# Close-Up

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This Santa Ana neighborhood is fertile ground for hopes and dreams, a starting place for Cambodian refugees and other Third World travelers trying to get away from war, misery and oppression.



CHECKMATE: Mantoulos Molos, left, defeats Hout Chay, right, in a spirited game of chess — to the delight of spectator Roeeun Long. The refugees gather on the lawn outside their Minnie Street apartments daily to socialize. Many people in the neighborhood keep their doors open so visitors can drop by.

# MINNIE STREET

STORIES BY TRACEY EATON  
PHOTOS BY PAUL KURODA  
The Orange County Register

**W**alk toward the alley, past the gamblers tossing down cards and cash. Walk past the grade-schoolers, skipping rope in the dirt, past the Tiny Rascal Gang members puffing Marlboros.

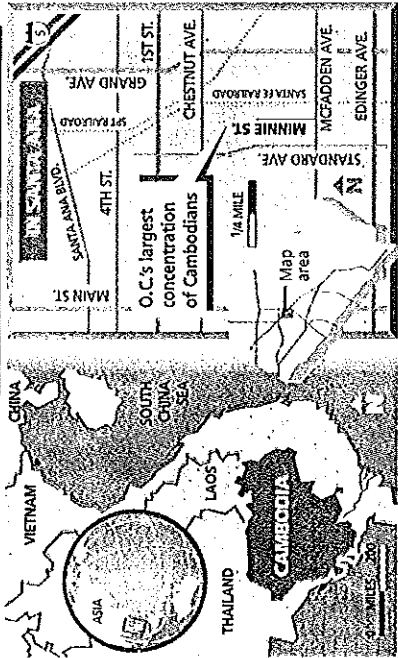
Climb the stairs into Apartment D, and a man with a sagging face and an eye that won't shut steps into the light.

He is Murh Phal, a survivor of Cambodia's killing fields, a former soldier who hid in the jungle after the communists took over, living off spiders, worms and snakes.

Phal, 52, barks a few words in Khmer, the language of Cambodia, and most of his 12 children scamper into a bedroom.

"I hurt," says Phal, whose face has been

## THE CAMBODIAN CONNECTION



The Orange County Register

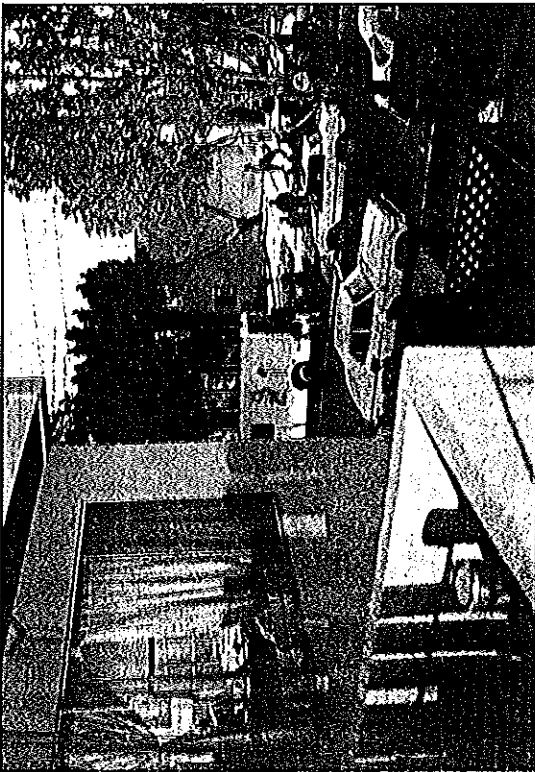
paralyzed since the day communist soldiers beat him with a rifle butt. "I'm never happy." Phal is among the walking wounded in Santa Ana's Minnie Street neighborhood, home to an estimated 3,000 Cambodians.

Like many others, Phal is disabled, carrying the mental and physical scars of war. He says he needs the government's help because he is too sick to work.

A 1991 study of the Minnie Street community showed that 91 percent of the residents received some form of government assistance. That compares to about 11 percent for the rest of Orange County. Leaders of California's Cambodian community say they are hard-pressed to fault their countrymen because the refugees have been through so much.

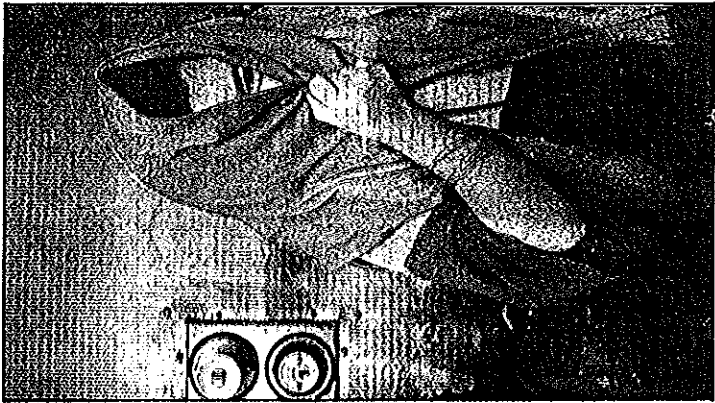
At least 2 million Cambodians — nearly a third of their nation's population — died of disease, starvation or were killed during the commu-

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**MINNIE STREET AT DUSK:** As night falls, people go outside to buy fresh vegetables from a vending truck, or play tooth sai, a Cambodian pastime similar to the American beach game Hacky Sack.

**EAST MEETS WEST:** Mary Na, 11, a Cambodian Muslim, peeks through her traditional shawl in front of the deadbolted, metal-lined security door to her family's apartment.



**NEW GENERATION:** Timothy Lay, 2, shows off souvenir mouse ears from Disneyland. Some parents worry about maintaining the Cambodian culture as their children grow up in the land of rap music, Madonna and VCRs. Simona Hou, 12, snubs Cambodian food, says his father, Praseup Hou. "I say, 'Where do you want to eat?' He says, 'Carl's Jr.'"

Refugee parents struggle to keep children out of gangs, but the cultural gap is wide, like the difference between ox carts and shiny Toyotas. Ultimately, many teens join gangs - and pay the price.



**DEATH IN THE FAMILY:** Ly Nith, above, grieves for her son; Sout Nay, 17, killed in a car crash. At far left, Sarlin Nay, 3, in the foreground, watches a video of his brother's funeral. A few hours before the crash, Nay had been on Minnie Street, telling friends that he and a pal had just been shot by Hispanic rivals in Long Beach.

At left, a friend examines one teen's minor wounds.

### EASY COME, EASY GO:

Some refugees gamble away their monthly government checks. Stakes run into the thousands. Some games are "very exotic," Santa Ana police Lt. Robert Helton says.



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nists' rule, from 1975 to 1978.

"Everybody lost someone," says Praseup Hou, past president of the refugee group, the Cambodian Association of America.

Those who escaped death spent years in refugee camps in Thailand.

"The fact that they do as well as they do is remarkable," says Gretchen Van Boemel, a researcher who has studied Orange County's Cambodians. "They lived through hell."

Most of Orange County's Cambodians live on or near Minnie Street. It's the largest concentration of Cambodians in the state outside Long Beach.

Refugee groups began settling Cambodians on Minnie Street in the early '80s because housing was plentiful. The isolated stretch — bordered on one side by railroad tracks — is lined with faded blue, beige and gold apartments.

A 1987 study called it "one of the most blighted areas in Orange County."

The 1991 study, by the non-profit Neighborhood Service Center, found that most of the refu-

gees were uneducated former peasant farmers with few job skills and no English.

"It's no wonder they ask for government help," says Mary Ann Salamida, the center's director.

Follow the sidewalk along Minnie Street as it snakes past the apartment buildings. Walk past Cambodian elders playing chess, past teen-agers kicking a plastic toy in air.

Inside a faded blue apartment, Sareoun Koy, 51, sits on her bed. The window is open, letting in a cool breeze. Her husband, Lom Lok, 40, walks in wearing a green army jacket. He has tattoos all over his body and, like many Cambodian soldiers, he considers them protective armor against bullets.

His wife receives a \$620 federal disability check each month. She says she relies on Supplemental Security Income because she can't work, gets headaches and can't use her arm.

She touches the scar on her arm and begins to

cry. She recalls the day communist soldiers killed her first husband and her family.

"My sister was pregnant. They killed her with a bayonet and put her on an ox cart with the rest of the bodies.

"They made me take off my clothes. I want to keep on my underwear," I told them. Then they made me raise my hands and close my eyes. I wanted to know if they were going to kill me with a gun or a bayonet or an ax. I opened my eyes. I saw a long knife and turned away, but they cut me. I fell down and pretended that I died right away."

Santa Smith, a mental-health worker with the Orange County Health Care Agency, says many refugees suffer from post-traumatic stress. "Probably every family has depression of some kind."

Refugees have trouble coping with daily life out of fear, she says.

"These people come from very, very rural areas. Some even came from the jungle. They had never seen a street, a car. They get scared. Scared to go out on the freeway. Scared to fill

out a job application. They feel like their lives are stuck."

Look over the short, squat fences. They're topped with sharp, black wrought-iron spikes. On the other side, there's an old Cambodian woman yanking weeds from a patch of dirt thick with onions and garlic.

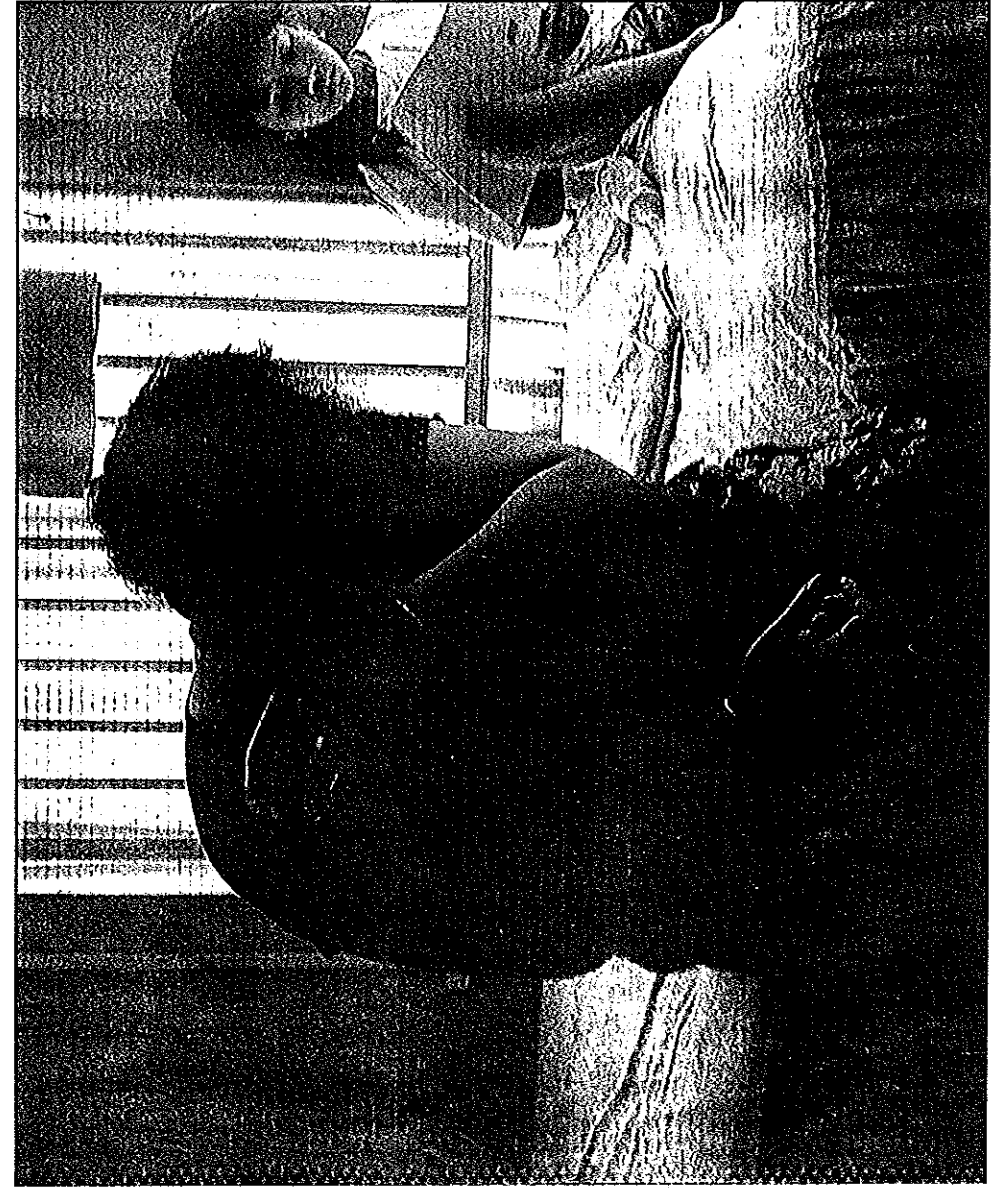
Through the open gate and up the stairs, a man sits on the floor, squirting eucalyptus oil on his wife's back.

Caam Eng, 61, drags the edge of a Cambodian coin across his wife's skin until it leaves purple streaks. Yan On quietly endures the painful treatment.

Later Eng lights a candle on her forehead and covers it with a tiny glass. The flame goes out and the glass sticks to her skin like a suction cup. His wife says the folk remedy sucks out "the bad winds" that give her headaches.

Like many refugees, she doesn't describe her

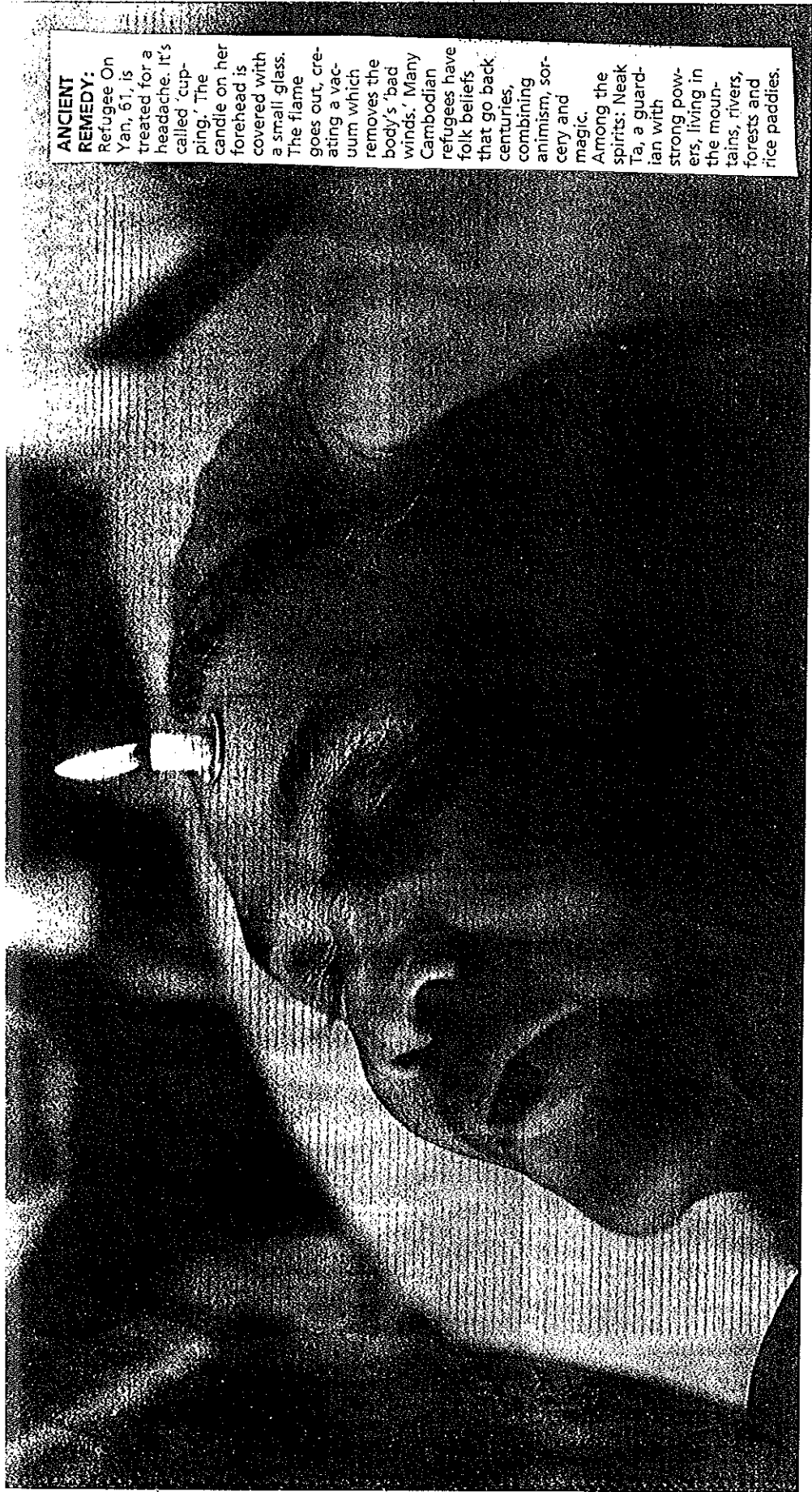
**T**hey survived Cambodia's killing fields, ran through jungles until their feet bled and ate tree leaves to survive. They spent years in refugee camps, then journeyed to the U.S. - and freedom.



**BRUSH WITH DEATH:** Saroeun Koy sobs quietly, at left, as she recalls being attacked by soldiers in Cambodia. 'I saw a long knife and turned away, but they cut me. I fell down and pretended that I died right away,' she says. Her daughter, Sokcheta, 6, sits nearby, scribbling.

Below, Koy shows how she turned away when the soldier slashed her arm and left her for dead. She escaped to Thailand, but other family members were killed. Koy says the memories, like the jagged scar on her arm, have not gone away. She can't work because her arm hurts and because she gets headaches. Living in a new country has complicated things. Koy says she knows little of the language and customs of America. For two years, she says, she washed her hair with conditioner, thinking it was shampoo. She scolded her children for getting O's at school only to find they meant 'outstanding, not zero.





**ANCIENT REMEDY:** Refugee On Yan, 61, is treated for a headache. It's called 'cupping.' The candle on her forehead is covered with a small glass. The flame goes out, creating a vacuum which removes the body's 'bad winds.' Many Cambodian refugees have folk beliefs that go back centuries, combining animism, sorcery and magic. Among the spirits: Neak Ta, a guardian with strong powers, living in the mountains, rivers, forests and rice paddies.

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ailments in Western terms. She has no concept of flus and colds. She says she feels sick because the hot and cold winds in her body are out of balance.

**T**he neighborhood kids chase each other on the sidewalk as a slightly built man on a child's bike weaves his way home.

Ya Karya, 41, is a part-time janitor and says he's not really interested in finding a better job. Why make more money, he says, if the government then cuts off his family's welfare payments? He'd lose \$1,200 a month, plus state health-insurance benefits.

He says he can't afford that. His wife, Abdoloh, has diabetes, asthma and high blood pressure. And she has a disability Cambodians simply call "thinking too much" — dwelling on the past, worrying about the future.

"I have no choice," Karya says. Many Cambodians are legitimately disabled. Others are healthy, but claim war-related trauma so they can cash in on federal benefits,

say state officials investigating fraud among Cambodian immigrants in Southern California.

The author of the 1991 study of the Minnie Street neighborhood estimates that a third of the immigrants living there were defrauding the government. Social Security officials who run the country's disability program, however, have never stepped in to find out who really needs help and who is faking.

"It hurts everybody," says David Chhen Poeung, a Cambodian refugee and a county health worker. "It hurts the community."

**P**eek into some of the apartments on the side streets off Minnie and watch the cards and money fall.

Some Cambodian gamblers spend their afternoons — and their government checks — playing cards.

Men and women sit on the floor in a circle, stashing coins and bills under the rug. Stakes sometimes run into the thousands of dollars.

"When you win, you win a lot. When you lose, you lose a lot," says one regular, a skinny

tattooed man who glances around nervously and refuses to give his name.

Because of the language barrier, police don't know much about Cambodian gambling. "We've come across some games," Santa Ana police Lt. Robert Helton says. "Some are very exotic. We can't figure out what's going on."

**J**ourney into back yards and alleys, get off the street, look at the faces. They're faces of many colors: Cambodian boys munching on Flamin' Hot Crunchy Cheetos. Hispanic children throwing a basketball through a homemade hoop. Buddhist monks chanting prayers while the faithful bring offerings: chicken with lemon grass and grilled catfish.

Abdul "Champ" Rahman, 39, a neighborhood vendor, has learned a smattering of Vietnamese, Spanish, English, Thai and Chinese to keep his customers happy.

"You can't be shy," he says, stopping to sell a bag of snowpeas.

His white truck is at curbside, packed with Thai eggplants, yams, papayas and chili pep-

pers. He is from Cambodia and says he's proud to be off the government rolls.

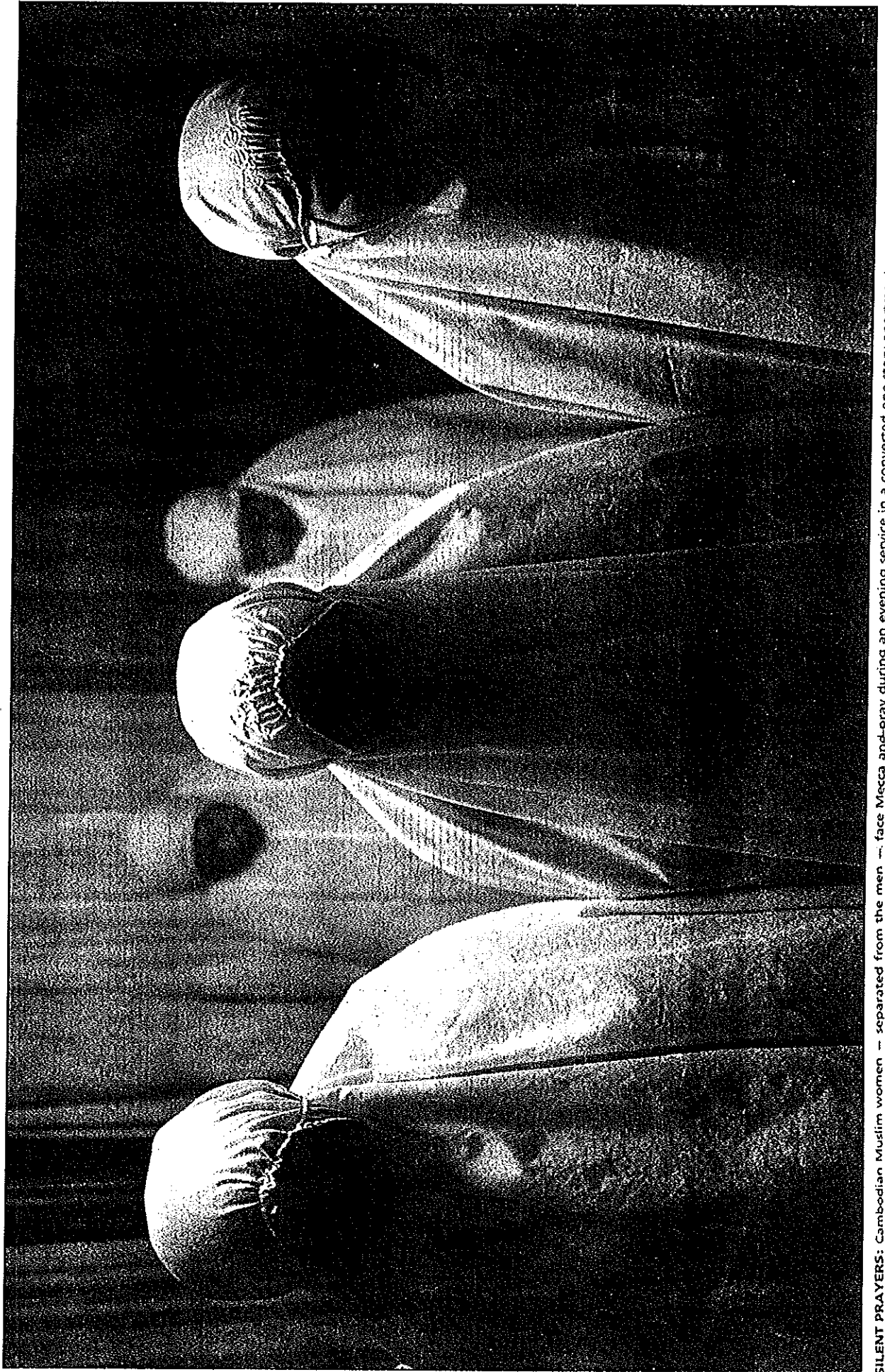
"I like to be my own boss," he says. "If I feel lazy, I can shut the door and sleep. I don't want the government to help me. The American government helped me already by letting me come here."

Many refugees who still collect disability checks hesitate to talk about their reliance on the government. They learned to distrust authorities while living under the Khmer Rouge. Many turn to middlemen, who — for a price — help sign them up for government aid.

The refugees would rather talk about Cambodians who move to better neighborhoods, go to college, start their own businesses. They all know about Ted Ngyo, the former Cambodian Army major who arrived in 1976. He worked as a janitor and gas-station attendant, saved his money and bought Christy's Doughnuts. Ngyo turned the store into a chain and himself into a millionaire.

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**M**ost of the refugee parents receive some kind of government aid. Many say they feel too old and too hurt to work. So they pin their hopes on their children and pray the Cambodian culture survives.



**SILENT PRAYERS:** Cambodian Muslim women — separated from the men — face Mecca and pray during an evening service in a converted one-story apartment.

# Minnie Street Cambodians battle their past, present

FROM PAGE 3

But getting off Minnie Street, tasting the American dream, isn't easy, says Chea Lim, youth coordinator at the Cambodian Family non-profit center.

He teaches young Cambodians their native Khmer and traditional dances at the center in a business park along the railroad tracks. His goal: to keep the next generation off the streets and out of gangs.

"They're searching for their identity," he says. "They're not sure if they're Americans or Cambodians."

"I don't think I'll ever fit in," says Lim's sister, Phalen, 20. "Even though I dress like an American, and talk like an American, I feel like I'm more Cambodian than American."

Lim can against a tree at Grant and Minnie streets and watch the gang members drive up in Mazdas and Toyotas.

A girl, known as Li'l One, barely 16, says she joined the Tiny Rascal Gang two months ago. She lifts the hair off her neck to show a fresh tattoo. "TRG," still red around the edges. She's sitting on the hood of a blue Toyota. Another Lady Rascal, as the girl gang members call themselves, plays with a white rabbit. "Our mascot," the second girl jokes.

Sathya Prum, 21, says he joined the gang eight years ago after Hispanic gang members beat him up. "I can protect myself now. I have a gang, too. They shoot, I shoot, too," he says. "We don't really want to join the gang, but we have no choice. You've got to fight fire with fire. They were making fun of us because of who we are."

Night has fallen. A dark sedan rolls up to the curb. Two Tiny Rascal Gang members get out. They're in trouble, so they've come home to Minnie Street. It's a place they can't wait to leave, but it

keeps drawing them back.

One of the teen-agers is tall, dressed in baggy shorts, a jacket and baseball cap. The other wears a blue, short-sleeved shirt over a white T-shirt.

As their friends gather around, they crouch on a patch of dirt and tell their story. They had just come from Long Beach, where rival Hispanics shot at them with a .22-caliber rifle. The shorter teen pulled down his pants to show them his wound. The tall one — Sout Nay, 17 — was also hit. He shrugs it off.

"It's nothing," he says.

The teens talk about cleaning up their wounds, taking the bullet fragments out themselves. They talk about retaliating. Then they pile back into the car and drive off.

About three hours later, Nay is killed in a car crash in Pomona. Police say the driver lost control. Nay, riding in the back seat, was ejected. Police found traces of marijuana in his system.

Nay's family mourns the teen-ager's death during a three-day vigil.

His six brothers and sisters crowd into the family's living room, playing a video of the funeral over and over, watching as their mother cries over the teen's body, clad in a dark suit. Friends bring steamed rice and soup, but the teen's parents are too sad to eat.

Like many refugees, the family had come to Minnie Street with dreams of a better life. Nay, the oldest child, wanted to be an FBI agent.

"All the teachers in school said he was a good boy," says his father, Sarin Doung, 49.

Four years ago, the family moved to Pomona. Doung says he wanted to get his son away from "bad influences" in the old neighborhood.

But Nay couldn't stay away from Minnie Street.

"I tried," his father says. "I was strict. But he paid more attention to his friends than to me. He liked going out with his friends."

"Now he's going to see God in the sky."

**KILLING FIELDS: Most Cambodian refugees were victims of Khmer Rouge atrocities before fleeing their country and eventually settling here.**

Vilay Poeung escaped the killing fields, but nightmares of soldiers dressed in black invade her dreams every night.

While the Chinese-backed Khmer Rouge ruled Cambodia, Poeung's young son, mother, father and sister starved to death — and she was helpless to stop it.

"I went to the Khmer Rouge for a little piece of sugar. I gave it to my mother. But as soon as it was in her throat, she died."

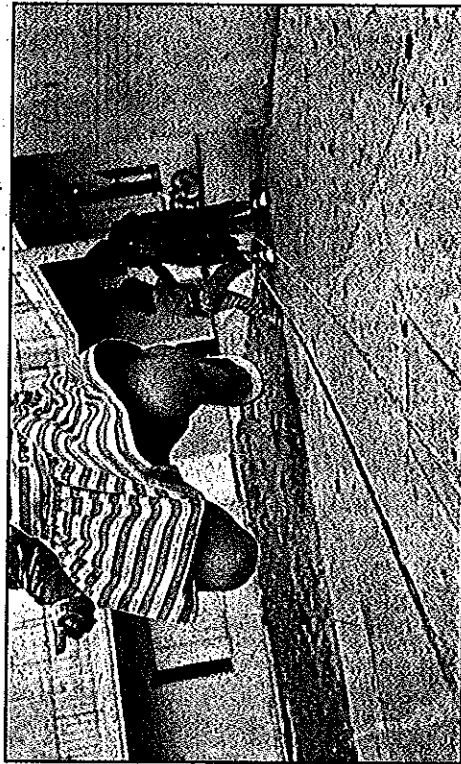
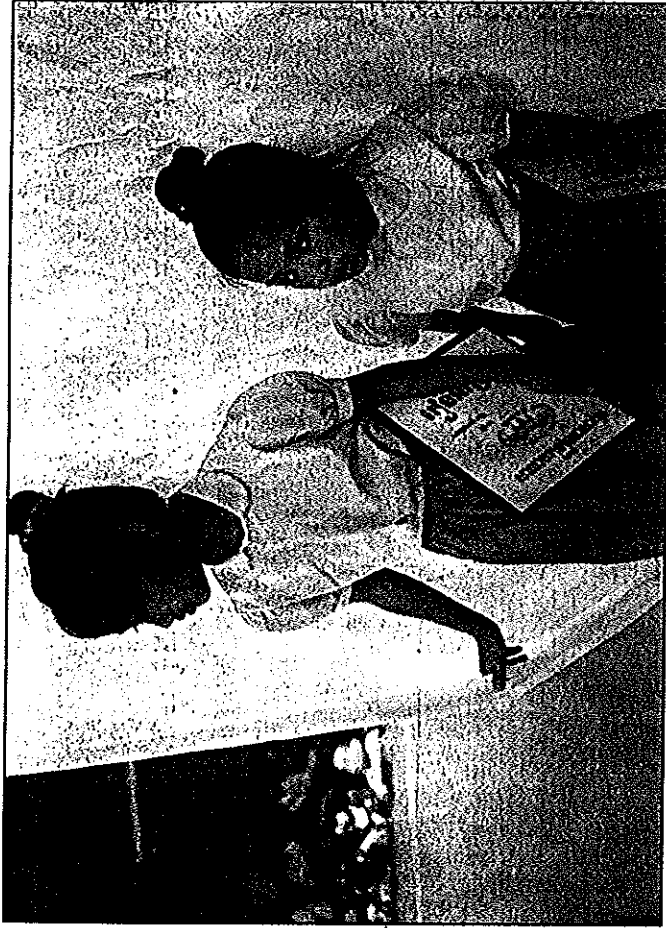
"I was holding her hand." Poeung fled to Thailand in 1980 and has settled in Orange, where she started a new family. But she said she can't put the past out of her mind.

at least another generation to recover. "They're still living the trauma," said Patricia Rozee, an assistant professor of psychology at California State University, Long Beach. "It's not being sorted out."

She and Gretchen Van Boemel, an eye specialist at the Doheny Eye Institute in Long Beach, have researched psychosomatic blindness among Cambodian women. They said many of the refugees they studied suffered atrocities before losing their sight.

Some women were raped as many as 30 times or they were tortured by the communist soldiers. Until the 1984 movie "The Killing Fields," most Americans had little idea of what Cambodians went through. The movie, based on a true story, is about an American journalist and his

Cambodian assistant, who stumbles across a



## CHILDREN OF MINNIE STREET:

Young girls play Chinese jump rope on Minnie Street. Above, Phalla Kong and Leakhana Nop wait for a cue to go on stage at a Cambodian dance during a New Year celebration last month.

bone-littered field as he is fleeing to Thailand. Refugees say the movie, horrifying to many Americans, is mild compared to the reality. "My friend and I went to that movie. We laughed the whole time," said Song Lach, 25, of Santa Ana.

In their quest to create an agrarian utopia, Khmer Rouge soldiers killed anyone who they saw as a threat: doctors, teachers, artists and religious leaders.

Even toddlers weren't safe. Soldiers smacked them against trees, then threw them into holes, said Boline Ek, a Cambodian refugee living in Westminster.

"Sometimes they wouldn't die right away," she said. "They'd cry, 'Help me, help me' all night until they died."