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## Book Review - Quintiliani, K. & Needham, S. (2008). Cambodians in Long Beach

Megan Berthold  
megan8@sbcglobal.net

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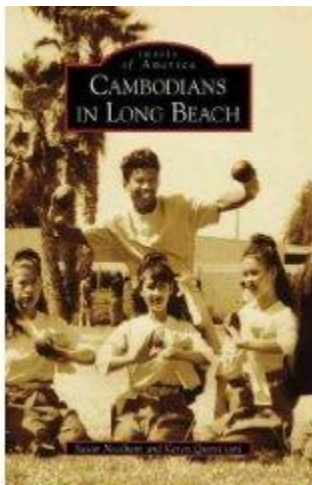
## Book Review

**Quintiliani, K. & Needham, S. (2008). *Cambodians in Long Beach*. Charleston, SC: Arcadia Publishing. 128 pp. \$19.99 (paperback). ISBN-10 0738556238.**

*Reviewed by*  
**S. Megan Berthold, PhD, LCSW**

When news of the Khmer Rouge takeover of Phnom Penh and the resulting devastation reached the West, the small community of Cambodians in exile in Long Beach, California rallied. They protested and urged the United States and the United Nations to come to the aid of those affected and organized to assist the early wave of refugees fleeing to the United States. *Cambodians in Long Beach* describes this response and chronicles the lives, achievements, and challenges of Cambodian Americans in Long Beach, California, the largest population of Cambodians living outside of Southeast Asia.

Cambodians Americans include early foreign students who came to Southern California in the 1950s, 1960s and 1970s, to the later waves of refugees who were forced to flee their homeland and resettle in the United States as a result of the killing fields of Pol Pot. The story spans approximately half a century of history of Cambodians in Long Beach. In the tradition of the *Images of America* series, the history of this community is largely told through a collection of photographs donated by diverse organizations and individual members of the Cambodian American and broader community in Long Beach. The



photographs are introduced by short background narratives that provide context and illustrate the unique character and history of this immigrant group that is largely comprised of refugees who fled Cambodia some three decades ago and built a vibrant and resilient community in Long Beach. It documents the various factors, institutions, and individuals that have helped the community thrive and evolve. The first photo in the book depicts Cambodians and other locals fishing off the Long Beach pier. It is a fitting start to this photo archive, as close proximity to the ocean helped to make Long Beach an attractive place to resettle and provided the refugee community with a link to their homeland, where many had supported themselves through fishing.



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The *Introduction* provides a brief historical background of the reasons why Cambodians came to the United States and to Long Beach, California. *Chapter One* covers Cambodians' early connections to Long Beach, California, mainly through images of some of the experiences of the small number of students who studied in Long Beach and other parts of the United States prior to the Khmer Rouge take over of Cambodia in 1975. These types of photos frequently were destroyed by many families during the Khmer Rouge regime due to risks of being killed if they were discovered. This first chapter also provides images and brief descriptions of key symbols from Cambodian history and culture (e.g., Angkor Wat, the Bayon temple, modern Cambodian classical dance, a Buddhist temple, and the capital city of Phnom Penh).

*Chapter Two* describes the years of turmoil and pain endured by Cambodians during the Khmer Rouge regime when approximately two million Cambodians died (out of a 1975 population of approximately seven million). The story is told in part from the perspective of Cambodians already in Long Beach. A rare photo of a group of Cambodians fleeing across the border into Thailand, documents from Cambodian American associations' efforts to aid their countrymen and women, and images of influential Cambodian leaders and of the early wave of refugees at Camp Pendleton are included. The considerable efforts made by Cambodian Americans to rebuild their lives and build a community in exile are portrayed. The interested reader is advised to examine the selected list of reference material at the end of the book for a fuller understanding of this complex history given the space limitations and format of this publication.

The reader is introduced to the role of Buddhism in Cambodia, the establishment of Buddhist temples in the exile community in Long Beach, the growth of Christianity in the Cambodian community, and the important services provided to the community by religious institutions and groups in *Chapter Three*. The inclusion of a Khmer Lao *wat* that serves those of mixed ethnic backgrounds is welcomed and shows some of the diversity in the community. A fuller discussion of the spiritual and religious life of the community would enhance this chapter.

Cambodian arts in Long Beach, from the traditional classical dance, music and carving to more modern music that blends rap with traditional art forms are depicted in *Chapter Four*. It is fitting that the image of a Cambodian student dance troop graces the cover as the arts have been a major medium through which the community has preserved its traditional culture and passed along its traditions to the younger generations. This chapter also reflects the evolution of the Cambodian American arts encompassing more modern art forms that nonetheless draw on its roots. The book includes a photo (p. 64) from the 2006 performance of *The Journey Across the Minefields to America*, an original play written, directed and performed by Chantara Nop, a long time community activist and figure in the local arts community. Missed, however, is the opportunity to inform the readers that this play was written in the form of a *yikee*, a traditional Cambodian opera style of theater, and that this was the first time that this traditional art form was performed in the United States.

*Chapter Five* covers community festivals and celebrations that help to sustain cultural traditions, language and symbols. It focuses predominantly on the Cambodian New Year and the various student and community group activities associated with it. *Chapter Six* introduces the reader to many of the key community organizations and groups that helped to shape the Cambodian exile community in Long Beach, including the two large mutual assistance associations (the Cambodian Association of America and the United Cambodian

Community, Inc.) that became models for other refugee social service, health, vocational, and literacy programs around the nation. Some of the challenges faced by the community are briefly presented along with creative programs and initiatives designed to address them, such as the Anaheim Street Community Police Center, Khmer Girls in Action that works on social justice issues, and Educated Men with Meaningful Messages that developed a teen pregnancy prevention program for young men. Many of the projects described have provided role models and support for the younger generation of Cambodian Americans. Prominent community members who have served the community for years are portrayed.

From the early arrivals onward, Cambodians in Southern California have been quite active in politics, both nationally and locally. *Chapter Seven* documents the various avenues of community engagement Cambodians in Long Beach have pursued, and the networks of support and leadership they developed that have helped the community flourish. The strong ties that many Cambodians in Long Beach feel to politics in Cambodia are portrayed along with advocacy efforts and protests organized on a variety of issues of concern to the Cambodian and broader community (e.g., gang issues, anti-deportation efforts, welfare reform, and support for hurricane Katrina survivors).

Cambodian refugees initially resettled in high numbers in some of the economically depressed and high crime portions of Long Beach. The development of the Anaheim Street corridor and Cambodian American businesses that helped to revitalize these neighborhoods are described in *Chapter Eight*. The final chapter (*Chapter Nine*) highlights the wide range of sports and recreation activities enjoyed by Cambodian Americans in Long Beach that promote health, foster leadership skills, and provide valuable networking and socialization opportunities. Along with such sports as soccer, martial arts, and badminton, other creative endeavors are depicted such as walking groups for Cambodian elderly and a community gardening project for Southeast Asians.

The book ends with *Selected Reading* and *Selected Narratives* sections that contain concise lists of reference sources to augment the materials presented. These sections direct the interested reader to relevant background material. The reference lists would be strengthened if they were expanded to include a broader range of material, drawing also on the rich literature on health, mental health, and other contemporary challenges faced by Cambodians in America.

Authors Needham and Quintiliani have taken an important step with *Cambodians in Long Beach* to document the unique history of a resilient community through images of many of the varied experiences and institutions that have shaped the growth of the Cambodian community in Long Beach. The photos and relatively brief narrative sections do a solid job in the limited space available of providing an overview of the community and will likely stimulate further questions and pique the reader's interest in learning more about the community. In some places however, more information about some of the events or terms (e.g., KPNLF, the Thai repatriation of Cambodians fleeing over the border) would be helpful in further educating readers who may not be very familiar with Cambodian history. There is enormous value in a community creating a collaborative account and archive of its history.

This book represents the beginnings of a larger project, the Cambodian Community History & Archive Project (CamCHAP), developed by CSU Dominguez Hills, CSU Long Beach and the Historical Society of Long Beach. The CamCHAP will expand on the images in *Cambodians in Long Beach* and create a virtual archive of historical materials focused on the

Cambodian community in Long Beach and a community-based research center. Proceeds from the sales of *Cambodians in Long Beach* will go towards supporting these efforts. For more information about CCHAP call 562-424-2220 or visit [www.hslb.org](http://www.hslb.org).

### **About the Reviewer**

S. Megan Berthold, Ph.D., LCSW, is a therapist and the Director of Research and Evaluation at the Program for Torture Victims, a non-profit that provides treatment to survivors of state-sponsored torture from around the world. She has worked as a mental health clinician with Cambodian refugees in the United States and in the Site 2 camp on the Thai-Cambodian border. She has also conducted multiple research studies in the Cambodian community in Long Beach, California documenting the health and mental health consequences of trauma experienced by Cambodians in Cambodia, refugee camps and the United States.



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