

# ORANGE COUNTY

## On Minnie Street, Cultures Mesh—and Clash



Ag Hang Yang, 65, sews as three grandchildren, Kong Yang, Linda Yang and Fang Cheng Yang, from left, look on.

By KRISTINA LINDGREN,  
*Times Staff Writer*

When the Khmer Moslems of South Minnie Street pray to Allah together, they gather in an unusual mosque—a spartan one-bedroom apartment with harsh fluorescent lights and little else.

Each evening about 7:30, in a rented second-floor apartment that is both religious school and temple for Santa Ana's tightly knit colony of about 100 Cambodian Moslems, rows of men in sarongs and Western dress face the living room doorway as they follow their imam, or religious leader, in prayer.

In the bedroom, women swathed in sheets covering every inch of skin except their faces, pray toward the only door, which faces roughly northeast.

### Home to Refugee Groups

At the opposite end of the neighborhood in southeastern Santa Ana, many of the area's 500 Lao people gather to play cards in the home of Linthong Panyanak, a former Laotian army captain who died last month after he lunged at a Santa Ana police officer with a large knife and was shot four times. His destitute widow received a small portion of the bets in memoriam.

The Khmer Moslems and Laotians are only a few of more than a dozen Southeast Asian refugee groups, who have brought their unique customs and beliefs to this once almost exclusively Latino portal of entry for Southern California immigrants.

Long an overcrowded island of low-income families surrounded by middle-class homes and newer apartment buildings, South Minnie Street is now a Third World enclave teeming with an estimated



# ENCLAVE: On Minnie Street, Cultures Coexist

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5,000 or more Indochinese refugees and Latinos, many undocumented Mexicans, who live side by side in sullen coexistence, often six to 10 people to an apartment.

Originally built for military families in the early 1960s, the nearly 1,200 apartments are relics of poorly planned, high-density 1950s-era buildings that have, through indifference and changing social trends, evolved into one of Orange County's most blighted, crime-ridden and overcrowded neighborhoods—and a throbbing headache for civic leaders.

"There are worse areas in Santa Ana, but nothing quite as big or as concentrated as Minnie Street," said George Gragg, the city's community preservation officer.

## Campaign Mounted

Last spring, after touring the roughly four-block-long area, Santa Ana's new city manager, Robert C. Bobb, mounted a city-wide campaign against substandard housing.

Gragg, who heads the crackdown on housing code infractions, said conditions have improved measurably since then because many of South Minnie Street's 32 absentee landlords have voluntarily complied with the city's orders to improve their properties.

Bobb said the city also has entered into preliminary discussions with at least one developer concerning the possibility of building 400 new apartments in the South Minnie Street area and buying and rehabilitating another 400 units now on the market.

He said the city would try to use the new units to relocate residents in order to avoid the kind of evictions occurring in Garden Grove's Buena Clinton slum renewal.

Santa Ana Police Department officials say that in the last few years of targeting the area as a haven for drug traffickers, addicts and prostitutes, they have seen a decrease in calls to South Minnie Street. In addition, they say the street will be walked by foot-patrol officers this fall as one of 10 targeted high-crime areas in Santa Ana.

## Improvement Doubted

But city officials would be hard pressed to persuade some of the residents of the nearly four-block stretch alongside the railroad tracks at McFadden Avenue that there had been an improvement.

"I don't like it here," 20-year-old Aysas Sop said, shaking her head as she fed spoonfuls of rice and water to one of her 13-month-old triplets.

"It's too noisy, too much crime, too many people, but we have no money to go to any other place," the Khmer Moslem woman said in the cramped \$355-a-month apartment where she and her husband have lived for almost two years.

Outside, rotten melon rinds, discarded soda bottles, beer cans and debris are strewn everywhere—in courtyards, on sidewalks and on hard-packed earth where there once were lawns. Laundry hangs on ropes strung against the peeling paint of wooden fences.

Apartment doors are wide open day and night. But the people are more outside than in, hoping for a breeze to bring relief from the oppressive heat, foul odors and overcrowding of South Minnie Street, where life has a rhythm all its own.

Dawn brings a bustle of people scurrying to work, to school, to stand in innumerable governmental lines, or simply to do the

household chores. Men drive in from Indio to sell fish by the pound. A junkman wearing a coolie hat tied securely under his chin plows through trash dumpsters to fill his cart. Salted clams, sausages and cabbage are put out on trays to dry.

Under a blazing midday sun, work grinds to a halt. Sarong-clad Cambodian and Lao women sit in clusters on sidewalks and dirt parkways. A Khmer Moslem woman seated in a doorway fans herself listlessly as she feeds her infant daughter.

As the sun begins to drop behind row upon row of dreary, two-story stucco buildings, factory and construction workers hop out of cars. Produce trucks pull up. Children race to meet the Sno-cone man. Teen-age boys pitch nickels, and still others hustle to the other side of the dusty railroad tracks to play volleyball and soccer under palms

and eucalyptus trees.

Nightfall brings a non-stop din of activity and blaring music, cruisers in low-slung, primer-painted cars and chattering children darting across the narrow street. A Chinese Cambodian attracts an eager audience as he dangles a wild baby opossum by one forepaw. He said he had just caught the usually retiring animal in his apartment.

In the early hours of morning, drug dealers attract crowds in the alleys. Prostitutes come door-to-door in search of customers.

"This is supposed to be the promised land, but it might as well be the Los Angeles slums—or just like living in East Coast tenements," said Althea Johnson, who moved from Baltimore six years ago to the neighborhood next to the railroad tracks in southeastern Santa Ana and got a large dog to protect herself from burglars.

"You can tell when it's 9 o'clock (at night) by the fireworks at Disneyland," said the 32-year-old, part-time school bus driver who rents an apartment in the investor-owned Bishop Manor condominiums at the northernmost edge of South Minnie Street. "You can tell when it's 10 o'clock and 11 o'clock by the gunshots going off—and that's every day."

However, even South Minnie Street is an improvement for some.

"It's better than the (refugee) camps (in Thailand)," said Syfah, a 64-year-old Moslem woman from Vietnam, as she self-consciously tried to hide her red teeth, stained from years of chewing betel nut. "Here, nobody can get hurt," she said.



**Mathsat Ly:** "We missed the buses. . . . And there are no Cambodians in Anaheim."



# ENCLAVE: Santa Ana's Diverse Cultures

*'I was very skinny when I got here. (My brother and two sisters) died (in Cambodia), of starvation. (Now) I go to school free and I can worship my God free.'*

—Heanh Kung, 16



## Police Viewpoint

From a law-enforcement perspective, Santa Ana police say things have been steadily getting better in recent years.

"It's not nearly as violent as it used to be," said Santa Ana police Sgt. Dick Faust, who has patrolled the South Minnie Street area for most of the last 10 years.

Faust said a higher police profile and a concerted effort to rid the area of heroin addicts, drug dealers and prostitutes "tamed somewhat" the strong-arm robberies, shootings and stabbings that plagued what was then a predominantly Latino neighborhood in the 1970s.

The biggest problems from the patrolman's point of view, he said, are related to overcrowding.

"Cars are double-parked in the alley because the people don't even have spaces for them," Faust said.



**Zoun Vang:** Laotian refugee wears silver earrings traditionally handcrafted by Hmong.

"You can drive down those alleys and see trash overflowing from the dumpsters because there just aren't enough of them."



Althea Johnson and her son Arthur, 11, obtained watchdog "Henry" after an attempted break-in at their apartment.



‘... I Can Worship My God Free’  
 ‘It’s Too Noisy, Too Much Crime...’



Photos by KARI RENE HALL / Los Angeles Times

Cambodian women pray in a second-floor apartment that serves refugee community as a mosque.

“It’s so overpopulated, dirty and cluttered, and it’s so hot—I don’t think anyone has any air conditioning—that there’ll be groups of 10 to 15 people just hanging around at 3 or 4 in the morning,” Faust said.

And there is the tension between East and West, revealed in part by the shooting incident. Many of the Lao people and some community leaders have criticized the police for excessive use of force in the late-night shooting Aug. 17 of Linthong Panyanak. At a recent meeting of Lao community leaders that was attended by members of the county Human Relations Commission, several in attendance repeated the unsubstantiated rumors circulating throughout the Lao community that a Latino neighbor had summoned police because of Panyanak’s loud and drunken behavior.

And after several years of living side by side on South Minnie Street, Asian and Latino children are seldom seen playing together in the neighborhood, according to police and other frequent visitors to the neighborhood. In interviews, Latino, Lao, Vietnamese and Cambodian residents of South Minnie Street revealed a clear distrust between Asian and Latino tenants over unsolved car stereo thefts, tire slashings and complaints to police about each other’s children. Some Latinos expressed bitterness in interviews that Indochinese refugees are accorded financial, educational

and vocational assistance to aid in resettlement.

Most often, however, police and community workers say they believe it is simply the difference of culture and language that only time will change.

Despite the cultural frictions and universal complaints about overcrowding, plumbing problems, rat and mice infestations, and cockroaches, many tenants appear to stay on for the camaraderie and security of this familiar halfway society between their native lands and America.

“This is better than the (refugee) camps (in Thailand)—it’s better because you have freedom,” said Chanthon Chuop, 26, a Cambodian who said he pays \$500 a month for the two-bedroom apartment he has shared with several others in the three years he has lived on South Minnie Street.

Mathsait Ly, 20, an energetic Moslem from Cambodia, was originally placed in a house in Anaheim but moved to South Minnie Street with his family at the first opportunity. Ly, who provides the soccer ball used by the rest of the Cambodian youngsters when he is not otherwise going to night classes or helping at the mosque, said he considers himself fortunate to be living closer to work, to school and to the Cambodian Family center in Santa Ana.

**Apartment Shared**

“We missed the buses all the time. And besides, there are no Cambodians in Anaheim,” said Ly, after quickly changing from jeans into a plaid sarong to receive guests in the \$400-a-month apartment that he shares with his uncle and five other relatives.

Many of the school-age refugees, like 16-year-old Cambodian student Heanh Kung, are fast becoming acclimated to their new home. She tries not to think of the last eight years, of the time when she, her mother and three older siblings were separated from her policeman father by the communist-led Khmer Rouge army.

At the age of 8, Heanh said, she was forced to leave school to help build irrigation ditches in the countryside, where she and a cousin had to fashion their own lean-to for shelter. “I saw my mother once or twice a month,” she recalled.

Laughing, Heanh made light of the memories. “I was very skinny when I got here,” she said. Abruptly,

her alert brown eyes opened wide to dispel welling tears when asked about her brother and two sisters. “They died. Of starvation. Um, I don’t want to talk about that.”

Instead, Heanh said that what she appreciates most about living



# Many Cultures in Santa Ana

in the United States is that "I go to school free and I can worship my God free."

Others keep old traditions intact and hope that one day they will return to their homeland.

Ac Hang Yang, a 65-year-old woman, sat quietly in a corner of the \$425-a-month apartment shared by seven family members, stitching an intricate needlepoint design in the vivid colors that are the trademark handicraft of the

Blue Hmong hill people of Laos. Her young granddaughters watched curiously as the old hands fashioned another wall hanging that would earn the family at least \$30 or \$40.

Her daughter, Zoun Vang, leaned forward over the beginnings of a pleated, multicolored embroidered wrap skirt, her silver Hmong earrings jingling forward. Meanwhile, Vang's 12-year-old daughter, Bo Yang, donned a turban-

style headdress, a blue-and-black kimono jacket and the ceremonial pleated skirt that distinguishes the Blue Hmong women from those of the White Hmong tribes, whose women wear pants instead of skirts.

Bo's cousin, Vang Yang, 19, said that although family members are grateful to be out of the refugee camps and in the United States, he misses his homeland. "When the communists leave, I want to go back," he said.

Yang pointed to an extra square of material at the neck of the kimono jacket. Yang said the gold embroidered cloth is really a stylized map dating back centuries to the times when the Hmong clans were run out of their native hill lands by conquering tribes.

"No one else could read it," Yang said. "It was to show us where to go if we needed to flee our oppressors . . ."



Los Angeles Times

**Rafael y Delgado:** A native of Mexico, he has been living on Minnie Street for eight years.



**Aysas Sop, 20, with triplet daughters:** "I don't like it (on Minnie Street), but we have no money to go to any other place."