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Health Theatre in a Hmong Refugee Camp

Performance, Communication, and Culture

Dwight Conquergood

A Hmong widow walks to a crossroad in Camp Ban Vinai, surveys the scene, and then settles herself on a bench outside the corner hut. Bracing her back against the split-bamboo wall, she begins to sing. At first softly, as if to herself, she sings a Hmong *khy txhiaj* (folksong). Aware of a gathering audience, she raises her voice to fill the space around her. She sings a lamentation, carving her personal anguish into a traditional expressive form. With exquisitely timed gestures, she strips and peels with one hand the branch of firewood she holds in the other. Tears stream down her face as she sings about the loss of her husband, her children, her house, her farm, her animals, and her country. She sings of war, and flight, and breaking, and of a time when she was a wife and mother in the Laotian village where silver neck-rings were worn. She punctuates each refrain by tossing away a sliver that her strong fingers have torn from the wood she holds across her lap as if it were a child.

The sad beauty of her singing attracts a crowd. She never makes eye contact but acknowledges the crowd's presence in her spontaneously composed verses, subtly at first, and then more confidently. She is both lamenting and entertaining. With nothing left to tear away, she makes the final toss of the last splinter, rises, and begins to sway with the rhythm of her song. People set out food for her. I give her the few baht I have in my pocket. Her face still wet, she breaks into a broad smile. Strange laughter interrupts her otherwise balanced verses.

She thanks us for listening to her sadness and tells us how happy it makes her to sing for us. Then she crosses the road to where I am standing and gives me a blue sticker the size of a nickel, with a crescent moon on it. It is one of the stickers the camp hospital puts on medicine bottles to indicate when the medicine should be taken, morning or night. With her thumb she presses it onto the page of my journal in which I am writing field notes on her performance. I notice that she has blue moons and golden suns stuck to her cheeks and forehead.

I came across this performance on my first day of fieldwork in Refugee Camp Ban Vinai in Thailand, where I had been assigned by the International Rescue Committee as a consultant for their environmental health education program. In many ways this opening image cathects the themes that would become salient in my fieldwork: performance, health, and intercultural exchange between refugees and expatriate health professionals.

I arrived in Thailand in February 1985 having just completed, with Taggart Siegel, a documentary on Hmong shamanism and the Sudden Unexpected Death Syndrome that has reached epidemic proportions among the Hmong resettled in the United States (Siegel and Conquergood 1985).¹ My intention was to do straightforward field research on cultural performance in refugee camps, particularly shamanism, but the refugee situation had become so politically sensitive in Thailand that all camps were closed to outsiders, particularly researchers. Therefore, I sought employment with the international aid voluntary agencies that administer health care and services to the camps. Fortunately I was hired by the International Rescue Committee (IRC) as a health worker in Ban Vinai, a hilltribe camp not far from the Mekong River that divides Thailand from Laos, and the oldest and largest refugee camp in Thailand (plates 1 & 2). During the time of my fieldwork the official population of the camp was 45,231 with an additional 2–3,000 undocumented “illegals” living in the camp without rice rations. I offered my services as an ethnographic consul-

Plate 1.



2. Housing quarters in Ban Vinai refugee camp. (Photo by Dwight Conquergood)



tant in exchange for the official papers that would legitimize my presence in the camp. My major assignment was to help design and direct an environmental health education program for this camp which was represented in many agency reports as the “filthiest,” most “primitive,” and “difficult” in Thailand.

Working with the refugees and a local Thai IRC employee, I helped design and direct a health education campaign based on native beliefs and values and communicated in culturally appropriate forms. Specifically, we started a refugee performance company that produced skits and scenarios drawing on Hmong folklore and traditional communicative forms, such as proverbs, storytelling, and folksinging, to develop critical awareness about the health problems in Ban Vinai.

The Ban Vinai Performance Company

Camp Ban Vinai may lack many things—water, housing, sewage disposal system—but not performance. The Camp is an embarrassment of riches in terms of cultural performance. No matter where you go in the camp, at almost any hour of the day or night, you can simultaneously hear two or three performances, from simple storytelling and folksinging to the elaborate collective ritual performances for the dead that orchestrate multiple media, including drumming, stylized lamentation, ritual chanting, manipulation of funerary artifacts, incense, fire, dancing, and animal sacrifice (plates 3–7). Nearly every morning I was awakened before dawn by the drumming and ecstatic chanting of performing shamans (plates 8 & 9). During the day women everywhere would sew *pa ndau* (flower cloth), an intricate textile art that sometimes takes the form of embroidered story quilts with pictorial narratives drawn from history and folklore (plate 10). Performance permeates the fabric of everyday life in Ban Vinai.

A high level of cultural performance is characteristic of refugee camps in general. Since my work in Ban Vinai I have visited or lived for short periods of time in 11 refugee camps in Southeast Asia and the Middle East, not counting a shantytown for displaced people in Nigeria. In every one of



3. Funerary rites in Center #5 of the camp. (Photo by Dwight Conquergood)



4. Spirit bridges used in soul-calling rituals. (Photo by Dwight Conquergood)



5. Young tricksters with powder masks prepare to throw water on the author during the Thai New Year water-throwing festival. (Photo by Dwight Conquergood)

6. *Unmarried Hmong women dance in a camp cultural revival center. (Photo by Dwight Conquergood)*



7. *The leader of the Hmong cultural revival center performs a newly composed song about becoming refugees. (Photo by Dwight Conquergood)*





8. & 9. An assistant balances a Ban Vinai shaman in ecstatic flight. (Photos by Dwight Conquergood)

10. A Hmong story quilt entitled "Viet Shoot Hmong." The Hmong use the story cloths to teach their children the tragic history of neeg tawg rog, "war-broken people," or refugees. (Photo by Jerry Zbiral)



them I was struck by the richness and frequency of performative expression. One explanation for this is that refugees have a lot of time on their hands to cultivate expressive traditions. But I think there are deeper psychological and cultural reasons for the high incidence of performance in the camps. Refugee camps are liminal zones where people displaced by trauma and crisis—usually war or famine—must try to regroup and salvage what is left of their lives. Their world has been shattered. They are in passage, no longer Laotian, certainly not Thai, and not quite sure where they will end up or what their lives will become. Betwixt and between worlds, suspended between past and future, they fall back on the performance of their traditions as an empowering way of securing continuity and some semblance of stability. Moreover, through performative flexibility they can play with new identities, new strategies for adaptation and survival. The playful creativity of performance enables them to experiment with and invent a new "camp culture" that is part affirmation of the past and part adaptive response to the exigencies of the present. Performance participates in the re-creation of self and society that emerges within refugee camps. Through its reflexive capacities, performance enables people to take stock of their situation and through this self-knowledge to cope better. There are good reasons why in the crucible of refugee crisis, performative behaviors intensify.

And, of course, even before the Hmong became refugees, oral traditions and cultural performance were the primary ways of educating the young and promoting beliefs and values among adults, as is the case in most third world cultures (see Ong 1982). Any communication campaign that ignored the indigenous cultural strengths of performance would be doomed to failure.

There is always the danger, however, of appropriating performance and using it as an instrument of domination. I wanted no part of the puppet theatre approach used by some expatriates as simply another means to get refugees to do what bureaucrats think best for them. Instead, I hoped that performance could be used as a method for developing critical awareness as an essential part of the process of improving the health situation in the camp. My project was aligned with the popular theatre approach to development and political struggle that is being used with success throughout the third world, particularly Africa, Latin America, and Asia. This theatre movement frequently draws inspiration from Paulo Freire's fieldwork as documented in *Pedagogy of the Oppressed* (1986). Augusto Boal (1985) and Ross Kidd (1982, 1984) are perhaps the best-known names associated with the popular theatre, or people's theatre movement. Fortunately, a sizable body of literature is developing around this kind of third world theatre (Bustos 1984; Desai 1987; van Erven 1987; Eyoh 1986; Kaitaro 1979; Kidd and Byram 1978; Thiong'o 1981, 1983, 1986). In *Helping Health Workers Learn* (Werner and Bower 1982)—which is the companion volume to the widely distributed *Where There Is No Doctor: A Village Health Care Handbook* (Werner 1977)—there is an excellent chapter on politics, health, and performance entitled "Ways to Get People Thinking and Acting: Village Theater and Puppet Shows."² This work perhaps more than any other inspired my efforts in Ban Vinai.

The critical/political component of popular theatre enacts itself in the process of developing the performance as much as, if not more than, in the final presentation to an audience. The backstage processes of researching and developing culturally appropriate materials along with the participatory involvement of the people are experiential/processual dimensions as significant as any explicit "message" communicated in a skit or scenario. For popular theatre to work effectively as a tool of critical awareness and empowerment for oppressed peoples it must be rooted in and begin with their cultural strengths. Instead of aesthetic distance and other concepts of elite theatre, popular theatre is contingent upon what Kenneth Burke calls rhetorical processes of "identification" and "consubstantiality" (1969:19–23).

The health worker who would use popular theatre must, perforce, become a participant fieldworker. Getting to know the people well is important not just as a technique for collecting appropriate materials and dramaturgical ideas to be worked into performance programs but as a way of earning their trust and respect. No matter how flashy and entertaining your health show, village people are wary of outsiders, experts who drop in for a day or two and then leave. Refugees, even more than villagers, have good reason to be skeptical of officials who hold themselves at a distance. The Hmong have a proverb: "To see a tiger is to die: to see an official is to become destitute" (Tapp 1986:2). When a health worker gets involved, becomes part of the struggle, that speaks as forcefully as any line in a performance script. Ndumbe Eyoh said it clearly: "There seems to be no other better way than associating fully with them, meeting them in the villages, joining them in their daily chores and sharing with them their lifestyles" (1986:23). That is why it was crucial for me to live in the camp with the Hmong, although that was considered a great oddity by the other expatriate agency workers who commuted from Chiang Kham village, an hour's drive away. Indeed, it was one of the camp rules that agency workers had to leave by 5:00 P.M. every day. Nevertheless, through delicate negotiations with the camp commander, a Thai colonel, I was able to stay overnight in the camp.

I hoped to break the pattern of importing the knowledge of “experts” and distributing it to the refugees, who were expected to be grateful consumers. I wanted to help demonstrate to both expatriates and refugees that *dialogical* exchange between the two cultures, the two worldviews and sensibilities, was possible (see Bakhtin 1981; Todorov 1984; Conquergood 1985).

One of the things that worked well for me as a health worker was to barter recommendations and health practices with traditional healers. This kept the program from being too one-sided. Because of the camp conditions, I personally had frequent trouble with intestinal disorders. For this discomfort, I went to the women herbalists who gave me a root to chew that was quite helpful. Early in my fieldwork I fell through a bridge and gashed my toe when a rotten board gave way. Herbalists treated my wound with soothing poultices from a glossy-leaved plant. Within a week the jagged wound had healed and I was able to go without a bandage. Because of the rugged terrain, however, I stubbed my toes repeatedly and reopened that wound more than once. I became quite dependent on the herbal healers—they knew that my trust and respect for their medicine was genuine. Their pleasure in my trust was overwhelming. Never have I received such devoted attention. However, when I came down with Dengue fever, a somewhat serious illness, I spent a week in a Singapore hospital taking advantage of the best that modern medicine had to offer in order to get back on my feet as soon as possible. My friends, of course, were curious about the hospital, and I shared the details of my treatment with them. What I tried to do in my fieldwork was enact an example of dialogical exchange, or barter, wherein each culture could benefit from the other, approaching health care issues within a both/and embrace instead of an either/or separation of categories; this approach was particularly important because the refugees were accustomed to having expatriates undermine, even outrightly assault, their traditions.

The first test was whether or not the Hmong would accept a popular theatre approach. Quite simply, could we gather an audience? That test came earlier than I had planned when five rabid dogs rampaged through the camp biting several children. The solution proposed by the camp commander was to go to the Thai market, buy five machetes, and kill all the dogs. To his great credit, the director of the International Rescue Committee in Ban Vinai persuaded the colonel against this course of action. He proposed instead that IRC use its funds to buy rabies vaccine and inoculate all the dogs in camp. The vaccine was purchased and IRC personnel were at their stations ready and poised with needles to vaccinate the dogs. No dogs arrived. The problem centered on communication. The Hmong were not boycotting the rabies program. They simply were baffled by this strange procedure, or unaware of it. There was no effective way of getting the word out as to where, when, and why dogs should be brought to the IRC stations for injections.

I had just arrived in camp and was beginning to establish rapport, recruit, and work with refugee performers/health workers. We had developed some characters based on stock figures in Hmong folklore and were designing and constructing costumes and masks. We had started improvisation and confidence-building exercises, but everything was still very tentative. The group was very young; all but one were under 20. We were just beginning to mesh as a group when the IRC director approached me and asked for help with the rabies vaccination project. Time was running out. The camp dogs would have to be vaccinated soon or Ban Vinai might have a serious rabies epidemic.

I certainly did not feel confident about putting the fledgling actors to this kind of major test so soon. We met and discussed the seriousness of the situation and collectively decided what would be the best strategy for quickly communicating this important message to as much of the camp population as possible. We soon agreed on a grand, clamorous, eye-catching “Rabies Parade” that would snake its way through all the sections of the camp. The tiger costume—appliquéd cotton fabric with a long rope tail—was almost finished, so it was agreed that the tiger would be the lead figure in the parade (plate 11). The tiger is a trickster figure in Hmong folklore and mythology, a very dramatic and evocative character. We knew the tiger would draw attention, inspire awe. The tiger would be followed by a nature-spirit, a ragged costume with long colored strings for hair, that would sing and bang on a drum. That noise, we hoped, would reach the people inside their huts and bring them out to see the commotion. We agreed that the chicken, a feathered costume with a striking cardboard mask that covered the entire head, would be the pivotal figure. After the dancing tiger and the clamorous nature-spirit got people’s attention, the chicken would talk through a bullhorn and explain in terms the Hmong would understand the seriousness of rabies and why it was important for every family to round up the dogs and bring them for injections. The chicken couched all this in an appeal toward protecting the children and then gave specific instructions for each neighborhood in the camp as to where and when they should bring the dogs. It was culturally appropriate for the chicken to be the leading speaker because in Hmong lore chickens have divinatory powers. They are frequently offered up in spirit ceremonies as guides to lead the way to the sky kingdom. Three days after a baby is born, chickens are used in an augury ceremony to determine the child’s future. Hmong naturally associate the chicken with divination because, as was explained to me, “Who is the one who knows first when the sun comes up every morning?”

We had some pep talks among ourselves to build confidence for going on the road the following morning. Not only would this be the performance company’s first show, it would be the first time any member of our young group had performed in public. The ones who seemed to be the



11. *The tiger leads the 1985 Rabies Parade. (Photo by Dwight Conquergood)*

most extroverted were selected for the key roles of tiger, nature-spirit, and talking chicken. The rest would don masks and come along as backup and as moral support for their comrades. Without assigning them specific roles, I encouraged them to do whatever they felt comfortable with in the parade. This would be an opportunity for them to get exposure in front of an audience before assuming more demanding roles.

Our casting instincts for the critical roles of tiger, nature-spirit, and chicken turned out to be inspired. At first, everyone was extremely self-conscious and inhibited. I was prepared for the worst. But as we kept banging the drum and hanging together, some children began pointing their fingers and laughing at the listless tiger. This brought him to life. The young fellow turned out to be a natural acrobat. Drawing on the media influence of Chinese movies that Thai entrepreneurs show in the open air once a month, he created a highly physical "Kung-Fu Tiger" to the joy of the people who streamed out of their houses to see such a sight. The fellow playing the nature-spirit turned out to be quite a musician. In addition to the drum, he brought along a folk instrument, a reed pipe organ, that his grandfather had made. He spontaneously danced as he blew the pipes, a great hit with the crowd. The chicken enjoyed the importance of his role and took it quite seriously. Understanding the power of word-of-mouth networks, the young actor instructed his audiences to go and tell their neighbors and relatives what they had just heard.

In terms of ability to gather an audience, the Rabies Parade was a huge success. Also, the novice performers had acquitted themselves beyond my highest expectations. However, the real test of our communication effectiveness was whether or not the Hmong would bring their dogs to the vaccination stations.

The next morning, full of nervous anticipation, I staked out the first vaccination station. It was a heartwarming sight. Dogs came pouring in—on rope leashes, in two-wheel pushcarts, and carried in their owners' arms. We could not vaccinate them fast enough. I myself vaccinated scores of dogs. The vaccination stations became a sort of street theatre. As you can imagine, the dogs did not submit willingly to these injections. It is a rather intricate operation to hold a struggling dog up in the air—we had no veterinary tables—and get it injected properly. There was a lot of scuffling and abortive thrusts of the needle—the stuff of farce. Also, with so many nervous dogs concentrated in one area, fights broke out. For a week this part of the rabies program performed before rapt audiences, drawing crowds equal to those for the parades. We vaccinated almost 500 dogs.

We took advantage of the performance company's initial outing to elicit direct audience feedback as part of the process of testing, developing, and refining our concepts. The drum that was used belonged to a shaman, and some of the older people objected to its use. When the young performer brought the gong from home, I recognized it as a shaman's and questioned the company about the appropriateness of using it. Everyone said there would be no problem, and that a shaman had donated it. In any event, we never again used a shaman's instrument in our performance.

Throughout the development of our health theatre programs we actively solicited feedback from Hmong elders. We received excellent, helpful criticism. After we had rehearsed our first set of acted scenarios we showed them to a Hmong leader. He critiqued the performers on three points: (1) the performers and stage managers not in costume should wear traditional Hmong clothes, and not Western-style T-shirts and trousers available in the camp through charity outlets; (2) the backup music for the dances

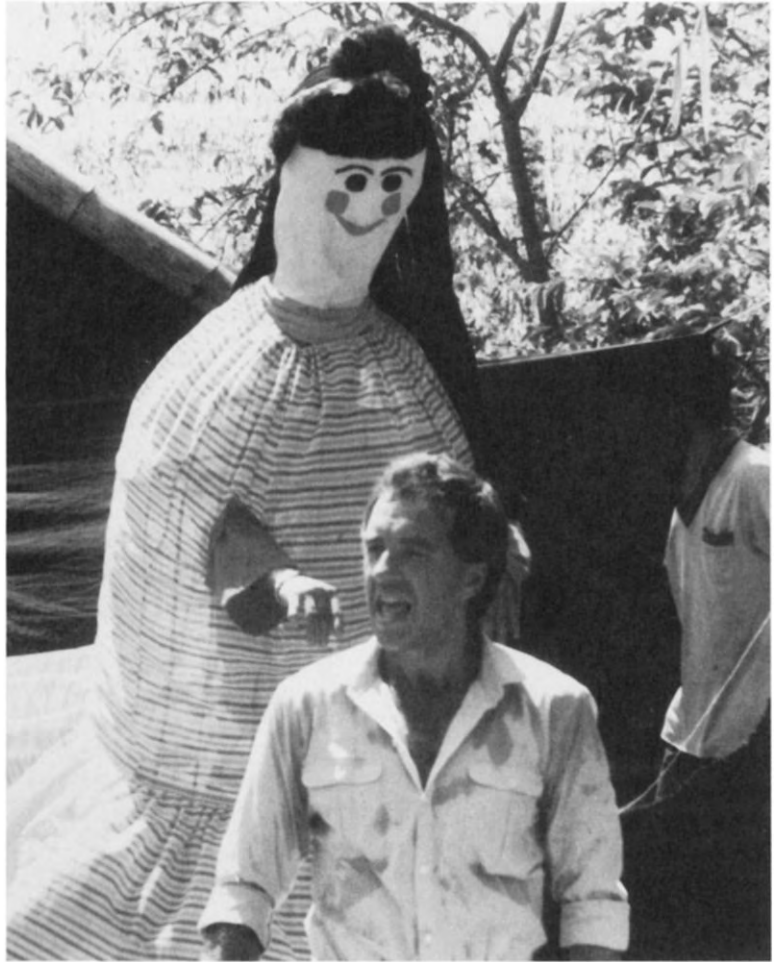
should be authentic Hmong, not Thai or Western-influenced melodies; (3) the rhymed chants were a little off from the traditional Hmong prosody, he taught the young performers the correct speech patterns. These criticisms were very useful because many of the members of the performance company were quite young and had grown up in the camp, exposed to outside influences. Moreover, the critique demonstrated the concern of Hmong leaders for maintaining their cultural integrity against the forces of assimilation.

There was one other criticism regarding the masks and the tiger. The oldest member of the performance company declined to wear a mask of any kind. The masks were too real for him. He was unable to frame the wearing of a mask as make-believe and worried about problems with spirits as a consequence of wearing the mask. We, of course, gave him roles that did not require wearing a mask and he remained a dedicated and important member of the performance company. But, soon after the Rabies Parade, a few of the people said that the masks and the tiger were scary and worried that some of the children's spirits might be scared away and they would fall sick. This response struck terror in me. As many anthropologists have noted, the political influence and power of shamans lies in their role as interpreters of the source and cause of illness. Shamanic ceremonies for a patient are in two phases: first, the divination/diagnosis, then the cure (see Conquergood forthcoming a). A shaman can influence the politics of a village by interpreting certain actions as the cause of illness or calamity. There is no lack of children falling sick every day in Ban Vinai. Fever and diarrhea are prevalent. Hundreds of children had enjoyed our parades. If one shaman attributed the sickness of one child to spirit-flight precipitated by the parade, the Ban Vinai health and performance company would be destroyed. One accusation could ruin us.

It was a tense week for me, but no accusations came. However, we decided to modify our staging techniques based on this feedback. Powerful characters like the tiger would no longer play directly to the audience in open form. Using theatre-in-the-round staging, we would direct the energies of the tiger and other masked characters inside the circle, using onstage focus. We would have these dramatic characters interact in an animated way with one another, but not directly confront the audience.

However, we did not want to lose the power of open-form communication, so we needed a narrator character who could safely and directly address audiences. Proverbs are an important communication form in all oral cultures and particularly popular with the Hmong (see Conquergood forthcoming b). We wanted to use a character who could recite health proverbs and tell stories and who would have a special rapport with small children. Almost a quarter of the camp's population is under the age of five, the most vulnerable group with a high rate of disease and death. Appealing to them would also be a way of involving their parents; Hmong families are tightly knit and children are greatly loved. This led to the creation of our most successful character who became the symbol for the entire health communication program: the beloved Niam Tsev Huv (Mother Clean), our cleanliness clown (plate 12). She was the collective creation of the entire performance company. Inspired by Peter Schumann's Bread and Puppet Theatre, I introduced the idea of a huge muppet figure constructed on a bamboo frame (plate 13). The performance company took it from there. Someone designed her face, a pleasant smile painted on a cloth-stuffed dummy's head tacked atop the bamboo frame; someone else did her costume, a colorfully striped dress that made her look larger than

12. *Dwight Conquergood performs with Mother Clean in 1985. (Photo by Lu Vang)*



life; another member made her hair out of dyed yarn. The performance company worked collectively on all phases of the performance process, from research for scenarios to composing songs and proverbs to costume construction. Except for the tiger's mask which I purchased in Loie, the provincial capital, all of the costumes and props were handmade from local materials.

The performer who eventually assumed the role of Mother Clean was a late starter—not one of the precocious three who emerged during the Rabies Parade. Several members of the company tried out the role, but he was the one who brought Mother Clean to life. Mother Clean, as he created her, was as gentle and loving as she was physically huge and imposing. She was a narrator-character who set the stage for the performance and, during the performance, could negotiate back and forth between direct address to the audience and dialog with onstage characters. Mother Clean particularly loved little children and always had special words for them. They adored her; sometimes during a performance they would run on stage to peek underneath her muppet skirts. Mother Clean always handled these moments with tender dignity, improvising skillfully. She also was very, very funny. Adults would double over with laughter at



13. The frames for the muppets are constructed out of split bamboo wicker. (Photo by Dwight Conquergood)

her antics. The incongruity between her size and her feigned daintiness was very farcical. Mother Clean grew in popularity so that the sight of her coming down the camp road would immediately draw a huge crowd for a performance. As she would walk through the camp, small children would shout her name. Hundreds of T-shirts were printed with her image in the Ban Vinai Print Shop run by a Japanese Refugee Relief Agency (plate 14). The camp literacy project used her image on posters. She was perhaps the most visible figure with the highest name recognition in the camp and she became the linchpin of our communication campaign. People believed that Mother Clean was on their side and the side of their children and they listened to what she told them about health and sanitation.

Performance, Garbage, and the Environmental Setting

Once we had demonstrated that performance was an appropriate and successful way of communicating with the Hmong, we set out to work on the environmental health problems of the camp. Ban Vinai has serious hygiene and sanitation problems. The cause, however, lies in the environmental circumstances, not any innate character flaw of the Hmong. Simplistic health messages imported from Western middle-class notions of cleanliness simply would not work for Ban Vinai. What was needed was a health education and consciousness-raising program that was sensitive to the history and specific environmental problems and constraints of the camp.

Ban Vinai is located in an isolated, hilly region of northeast Thailand, the poorest sector of the country. The camp has a population larger than any city in this remote area of Thailand, surpassing even Loei, the provincial



14. A Mother Clean T-shirt printed in the Ban Vinai Print Shop. (Photo by Dawn Murrey)

capital. It is the most populous refugee camp in Asia. All these people are crowded onto about 400 acres of undeveloped land. The camp space is intensively used because refugees are forbidden to go outside the camp without the express permission of Colonel Vichitkala, the Thai camp commander. Armed guards enforce this policy. During the time of my fieldwork more than one refugee was shot for venturing outside the camp.

The overcrowding in the camp, not to mention the sanitation level, is compounded by large numbers of animals. The Hmong were sturdy peasant farmers before they became refugees. Resourceful by nature, they supplement their diet by raising a variety of animals within the confines of the camp. Purchased as inexpensive chicks, and a valuable ceremonial animal, chickens scratch about everywhere. Every family seems to have at least half a dozen. Ducks and geese are also raised. Pigs are a common sight, and dogs and goats roam freely throughout the camp. Because space is at such a premium, there is little room for separate livestock pens. During the day they roam outside and at night they are often brought inside the house. In one of the thatched huts where I regularly slept overnight, I shared a corner with seven chickens—they were kept underneath wicker baskets at night—and the neighbor's pig. Inside many of the homes of very poor families you could find guinea pigs scurrying about, an inexpensive source of protein. Ban Vinai boasts a herd of more than 20 dairy cows, a gift from a well-meaning but uninformed charitable organization with the intention of raising the nutritional level of the camp. The Hmong do not drink milk; like many Asians, some are lactose intolerant. Because the cows were donated for the common good, no individual is authorized to butcher them. Therefore, completely useless, the cows wander freely throughout the camp, contributing to the hygiene and sanitation problems of the camp.

Housing is extremely crowded and inadequate. The United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees built 395 tin-roofed buildings, each one with ten small rooms. The camp was established in 1975 for 12,000 refugees; the population has nearly quadrupled since then. The 1984 birthrate was 5.5 percent, one of the highest in the world. Twenty-five percent of the Ban Vinai population was born in the camp. The refugees have responded to the housing shortage by building more than 2,250 thatch/bamboo huts. But it costs more than \$50 for the materials to build a house. That kind of money is hard to come by in a refugee camp, so extended families crowd together in congested living quarters. During the rainy season, some of these dirt-floor huts are in danger of getting washed away so families use partially buried discarded glass bottles to bank up the earth around their huts.

Camp Ban Vinai is the largest gathering of Hmong in the world. The tragic events of war and global politics have led to this artificial urbanization of the Hmong with dizzying speed. Traditionally, the Hmong lived in small mountaintop villages in the forbidding terrain of northern Laos where they tended their animals and grew dry rice and corn in fields cleared from the forest. F.M. Savina reported that the Hmong in Laos "do not seem to like big settlements. They prefer to live in little groups making up hamlets rather than real villages" (1930:182). A peaceful mountain people who kept to themselves, they had little contact with even the lowland-dwelling Lao, much less the rest of the world, until they were pulled into the war in Southeast Asia. In the 1960s they were recruited by the CIA and trained by the Green Berets as anticommunist guerilla fighters.³ In proportion to their population, they suffered casualties 10 times higher than those

of Americans who fought in Vietnam (Cerquone 1986). When U.S. forces withdrew in 1975, Laos collapsed and came under the rule of a government hostile to the Hmong who were viewed as collaborators with the hated enemy. Thousands fled their beloved mountain homes to seek asylum in Camp Ban Vinai, just across the Mekong in Thailand. Almost overnight they were thrown into a densely populated camp with no time to develop the adaptive cultural traditions and folkways, not to mention garbage disposal systems, that societies in the West have had centuries to evolve. It is any wonder, then, that there would be severe environmental health problems in Ban Vinai?

Moreover, there is no running water or adequate sewage disposal in the camp. The camp commander lists the water shortage as one of the major problems. Water has to be carried long distances in buckets balanced on shoulder yokes or in 10-gallon cans strapped to the back, a job usually done by teenagers. Sewage disposal is also a chronic problem. There are not enough pit toilets for the camp population. The latrines are distributed unevenly throughout the camp and are clustered together in long rows—convenient if you happen to live close to a cluster but the trade-off is the overwhelming stench. Because there is a shortage of toilets, they are kept locked and families have to obtain keys from the camp administration. Keys get lost, and there are never enough keys to go around, particularly for all the children. Further, you need to bring along a bucket of water to flush the shallow pit, water that is scarce and has to be carried on the back of some family member. Obviously, there are many disincentives for using the pit toilets; the stench alone is often a deterrent. Because gaining access to and using the pit toilets is a rather complex operation, most small children (one-fourth the population) simply cannot manage.

I go into detail about the camp toilets in order to give an infrastructural explanation for what has become a topos in reports about Ban Vinai from Western journalists and visiting relief workers. Ban Vinai is notorious for the image of refugees relieving themselves in the open space. This act, so shocking to “sophisticated” sensibilities, functions discursively as a sign of “the primitive.” Before I left Bangkok en route to Ban Vinai, I heard stories about this behavior from other aid workers and came across this motif in written reports as well as oral anecdotes. This recurrent image is psychologically and rhetorically interesting for what it reveals about our discursive projections of the Other. My observations are that the Hmong are a very modest people. The act does not occur with the frequency the stories imply. However, you have only to spend three days and nights in the camp in order to understand the environmental circumstances that produce such behavior even occasionally. Living in the camp with the refugees and experiencing these environmental constraints and indignities was instructive for me.

The following excerpt from an unpublished report written by an agency health worker is representative:

The first week I arrived in Ban Vinai, a refugee city, a city without discipline, I strolled around the camp and realized the important need for basic health education. No one looks after the children playing cheerfully in the streams. The streams in which they defecate, take a bath, and throw garbage including drainage from houses and toilets. The refugees use sticks for cleaning after defecation and throw them behind the toilets. When it rains, the sewage goes into the streams. Also, a lot of children wear nothing when it rains.

15. *Mother Clean* is featured in this 1985 Garbage Theme Month performance. (Photo by Dwight Conquergood)



Instead of blaming the Hmong for the poor health conditions, our performance company situated the problem in the environmental setting. Instead of didactic health messages instructing the Hmong to change their behavior, we developed performances that would stimulate critical awareness about the camp environment, particularly how it differed from the natural mountain villages of the Hmong in Laos. Once their radically changed living conditions could be brought to consciousness through performance, the Hmong might understand the need for changing some of their habits to adapt to this altered situation. Such a line of thinking was not alien to them. One man offered me an environmental explanation for the high suicide rate in Ban Vinai. He argued that, in their homeland, family tensions and pressures could be relieved by the troubled person leaving home temporarily to stay with relatives or friends in the next village until the situation cooled down. Without this outlet in Ban Vinai, pressures sometimes mount until suicide seems the only escape. Also, there is a traditional Hmong proverb that encourages adjustment to change of venue: "When you cross a river, take off your shoes/When you move to another place, you must change your headman" (Conquergood forthcoming b).

We mounted a series of performances focused on the problem of garbage in the camp (plate 15). The first thing we had to do was problematize "garbage." In a traditional Hmong village, garbage would not be the problem it was in Ban Vinai. If all disposable waste is organic, and you live in a small hamlet on a windswept mountain slope, then pitching waste out the door is not a problem. It becomes instant feed for the household pigs or is biodegradably reabsorbed into the natural ecology of the environment. Within the context of a crowded refugee camp, however, traditional ways of waste disposal entail radically different consequences. We wanted to get this message across without demeaning the people, suggesting that they were dirty.

Our "Garbage Theme" month featured *Mother Clean* in one of our most successful scenarios. Drawing on the *poj ntxoog* evil ogre character from Hmong folklore, we created an ugly Garbage Troll in soiled ragged clothes and a mask plastered with bits of garbage and dirt (plate 16). The

Garbage Troll would lumber into the center of the playing space and begin dramatizing the behavior we wanted to discourage—peeling eggs and other food and throwing the waste on the ground, picking up dirty food from the ground and putting it into his mouth, and so forth. After a few minutes of this improvisation, the tiger would charge on stage and rebuke the troll for such unseemly behavior. The tiger would growl and snarl and pounce at the impassive troll, all the while making verbally explicit how bad this behavior was. The tiger would give up and leave but then the pig would run out on stage and fuss at the troll for his disgusting conduct. The young performer who played our pig was a gifted clown and there would be much farcical business between the pig and the Garbage Troll until the troll drove the pig away. Then the chicken would follow suit and sagely admonish the troll about the environmental consequences of his behavior and how he would make children sick by throwing garbage all about. The troll would respond by throwing more garbage on the ground and at the chicken, driving the latter away.

From a considerable distance, Mother Clean would slowly sweep toward the dirty Garbage Troll. The children forming a circle around the playing space would have to open up their ranks to permit Mother Clean's passage. They would call out, warning her to beware of the nasty Garbage Troll. But Mother Clean would be unaware of the danger; absorbed in sweet thoughts she would sing to herself and dance as daintily as her bulk would permit. The children in the audience would increase the volume of their warning cries until Mother Clean heard and caught sight of the Garbage Troll. Unafraid, slowly, triumphantly she would sweep toward the nasty troll huddling in the dirt making menacing noises. She'd reach down, pull him up by his hands, then, in a moment of redemptive grace, remove his dirt-face mask and wash his face and hands. Transformed, the troll and Mother Clean danced as music was played from our battery-operated cassette player. Tiger, pig, and chicken rushed back on stage to



16. *The Garbage Troll (standing, left) performs during Garbage Theme Month 1985. (Photo by Dwight Conquergood)*



17. & 18. Health workers wearing sandwich-board posters join the performance circle. Mother Clean slowly spells out and reads the garbage theme proverbs for those in the audience who are nonliterate. (Photos by Dwight Conquergood)



dance and sing with Mother Clean and the redeemed troll. Our health workers, wearing sandwich-board posters with the health theme boldly lettered, would join the circle, and Mother Clean would slowly spell out and read the poster proverbs for those in the audience who were nonliterate (plates 17 & 18). She would talk and invite comment and discussion about the theme.

The theme we developed in proverb form and painted on the sandwich-board posters was this:

*Thaum peb nyob pem roob cua thiab nag
Tshoob yam khoom qias neeg pov tseg.
Tam sim no muaj neeg coob coob nyob hauv zos vib nai,
Peb txhua leej txhua tus yuav xyuam xim
Cheb yam khoom qias neeg kom huv si*

[When you lived in the mountains
The wind and the rain cleaned the garbage.
Now with so many people in Ban Vinai
We all must be careful to clean up the garbage]

Mother Clean would lovingly amplify the message of the proverb, explaining how a small village on a mountain slope with plenty of space for everyone could absorb organic refuse naturally through the elements of wind and rain. She pointed out that Ban Vinai is very different from the mountaintop villages in which the Hmong used to live. Consequently, customs and habits, particularly regarding garbage, needed to change accordingly. She exhorted a change in behavior without degrading the people whom she was trying to persuade, locating responsibility in the environmental circumstances. Everyone could agree that indeed Ban Vinai was very different from their former home. After establishing that premise, Mother Clean then could make the point about the need for adaptive response to this new situation.

This scenario was staged three or four times a week, each time in a different section of the camp. In this way we could reach most of the camp population in a month's time. Each day we would find a wide place in the road, or a clearing between houses, and use that empty space for the performance. One of the company members would walk around the area with a bullhorn announcing the performance. The performances were so popular that we sometimes had crowd control problems, with people pressing in so close that there was no room for the performers to move. One of the company members, usually the one who made the initial announcements over the bullhorn, would serve as "house manager." He would draw a large circle on the ground with a pointed stick and declare that area the players' space, off-limits to curious children. This strategy worked, except for the occasional dog that wandered on stage.

It was hard work performing in the open air under the tropical sun. I admired the dedication of the refugee performers. I was particularly touched by the young man who played Mother Clean. Lee Neng (his name means "human being" in Hmong) was malarial and every month or so would run a fever, have a stomachache, and pass blood in his urine. I insisted that he not perform during these bouts and proposed that we use an understudy when he was sick. Besides, the roles of the pig, chicken, and tiger were passed around among the company members. But Lee Neng knew that he had a special rapport with the children and that his character

Niam Tsev Huv was doing good in the camp, helping the little children so that they would not get sick so often. He said it made him feel very good when he was Niam Tsev Huv and he refused to surrender the role, even when he was ill. Sometimes he was so weak he could barely be heard. I would give him aspirin and lighten the performance schedule when I knew he was feverish.

We included a participatory dimension to the performances by teaching health and sanitation songs to the children. Initially, young children performers were trained as role models who traveled around the camp with our troupe, singing and dancing the sanitation songs (plate 19). However, we incurred "labor problems" with the young actors when their parents complained about the taxing performance schedule. We discontinued the Chorus of Children and used members of the performance company, particularly the young women, as sanitation song leaders.

The children of the camp loved to learn and sing these sanitation songs. They particularly enjoyed a call and response style of singing in which the audience would alternate the singing of verses with a leader, Mother Clean or one of the refugee health workers. We put some of the songs on cassette tapes, and distributed them throughout the camp in that way as well. Most of the Hmong have access to battery-operated cassette players because many of them correspond with relatives resettled in the West by sending cassettes through the mail. I also gave cassettes of these songs to the "Hilltribe Broadcast Program," Radio Thailand. Later, when I toured their studios and facilities in Chiang Mai and interviewed the Hmong broadcasters, they reported that the Ban Vinai Health Songs were very popular with their listening audience.

Here is a sample health song composed for our campaign:

*Yog koj mus yos hav zoov tsam ysov tom
Yog koj tsis ntxuav muag ntxuav tes, taw ibce
Koj yuav tau kab mob
Yog koj mus tom tej hav tsaub liab koj yuav tau mob*



19. *The Chorus of Children singing and dancing sanitation songs. (Photo by Dwight Conquergood)*

[If you play in the jungle
 The Tiger will bite you
 If you don't wash your hands, face, and body
 You will get sick
 If you play in the garbage
 You will fall ill]

Another sanitation song, "Using the Latrine," turned out to be one of the most durable songs in the repertoire. Mother Clean led a parade of 40 singing children throughout the camp, with the message visually reinforced on posters that graphically depicted the appropriate behavior (plate 20). There was follow-up to the parade with activities such as coloring pictures and a game called "Take Your Small Brother or Sister to the Latrine." Once again, reaching and involving the children was an important way of communicating with adults.

Mother Clean was the anchor for the performance company. A variety of performance materials and activities could be organized around her character. She seemed to embody something very appealing to the Hmong. Adults as well as small children were delighted by her messages. I will never forget the image of a very thin, elderly man doubled over his walking stick with uncontrollable laughter during Mother Clean's performance. His neighbors told me they had not seen him laugh in a long time.

Expatriate Health Professionals and the Hmong: Perceptions of Difference, Disorder, Dirt, and Danger

The more I learned about the history and cultural dynamics of the camp, the more I came to believe that the expatriate health professionals needed consciousness-raising messages as much as the Hmong. The Hmong are perceived by Western officials and visiting journalists as the causal, producing agents of the unsanitary and unhealthy conditions in the camp. Instead of seeing the Hmong as struggling within a constraining context of historical, political, and economic forces that have reduced them from proud, independent, mountain people to landless refugees, the Hmong are blamed for their miserable condition. In her brilliant and incisive analysis of refugee assistance programs, Barbara Harrell-Bond notes this sad pattern: "[I]t is alarming to observe that assistance programmes are dominated by an ethos in which the victims of mass exodus are treated as the villains" (1986:305). It is easier to scapegoat than to historicize a complex problem.

I began to collect the phrases used regularly to describe the Hmong by agency officials who worked in Ban Vinai. The word I heard most often was "filthy," followed closely by "dirty," and often part of a cluster of terms that included "scabies," "abscesses," "feces," and "piles of garbage." A phrase regularly employed to cover a multitude of perceived sanitation sins was the following, "They're one step out of the Stone Age, you know." A meaning-packed word heard about the Hmong almost every day was "difficult," and its ramified derivatives: "difficult to work with," "the most difficult group," "set in their ways," "rigid," "stubborn," "you cannot get through to them," "backward." One dedicated humanitarian agency employee who had worked with the Hmong for several years told me that "the hand of God is on this place," but as for the Hmong living here, "they're a fearful lot . . . you cannot work with them." These perceptions surface in official discourse as well. Senator Alan Simpson, ranking minority member of the Senate Subcommittee on Im-



20. One of the vividly illustrated posters carried by Mother Clean and the performance company in the 1987 *Using the Latrine Parade*. (Photo by Dwight Conquergood)

migration and Refugee Affairs, visited Ban Vinai for a day during the time of my fieldwork. He introduced a new metaphor into this complex of discursive denigrations of the Hmong. He called the Hmong "the most indigestible group in society" (1987:4). Ambassador Jonathan Moore, the new U.S. Coordinator for Refugee Affairs, was more diplomatic when, in a 1987 interview, he singled out the Hmong as "the people with special problems" (1987:5).

The dialectic between the perception of "difference" and "dirt" is interesting. I suggest that so much focus on the "dirtiness" and "difficulty" of the Hmong is actually an expression of Western expatriates' uneasiness when confronted with Difference, the Other. A Western aid official's encounter with the Hmong is a confrontation with radical difference—in cosmology, worldview, ethos, texture of everyday life. The difference is exacerbated if the relief workers are devout Christians. The three relief agencies that have been in charge of the camp hospital have all been Christian organizations which have perceived the animism of the Hmong as "devil worship."

For medical health officials with a professional commitment to the tenets of Western science, the equally strong Hmong belief in spirits and shamans challenges fundamental Western assumptions about the nature of the world. What is frustrating for agency workers is that the acceptance and cooperation of the Hmong are essential for the successful delivery of health care programs and services. The Hmong are the clear majority in Camp Ban Vinai, of course, and they continue to control their symbolic universe. Much to the distress of agency workers, they have not acquiesced to the new scientific epistemology presented to them as a "superior" form of knowledge. Visible affirmations of their traditional way of understanding the world are displayed everywhere. Here are excerpts from a report by Dr. Ronald Munger, an epidemiologist who did research in Ban Vinai:

The striking issue in regard to traditional Hmong health practices is how visible these practices are in Ban Vinai Refugee camp in Thailand. [. . .] Shamanism was widely practiced. [. . .] There were other more common everyday rituals which reflected pervading belief in the spirits in every aspect of life. Ritual figures or heads of sacrificed animals set on poles were common. Wooden boards on the floor at the doorway of a home were intended to confuse unwanted spirits and prevent them from entering the house. [. . .] Pleasing the spirits was a primary goal. For example, bracelets, necklaces, and other devices were often placed on babies and small children to contain the spirit of that person and avoid its loss. [. . .] Many Hmong homes [. . .] contained small altars with the items needed to interact with spirits. There were buffalo horns [. . .] rings and rattles used during rituals (1984).

All this display of "difference" and "strangeness" is quite dramatic to Western eyes and makes a vivid impression. Unfortunately, as Tzvetan Todorov reminds us, "The first, spontaneous reaction with regard to the stranger is to imagine him as inferior, since he is different from us" (1984:76). All too easily, "difference is corrupted into inequality" (1984:146).

Mary Douglas' ideas about the social relativity and symbolic functions of dirt help explain how "Difference" and "Dirt" are conjoined in perceptions of the Hmong. Inspired by William James' insight that dirt is "matter out of place" (Douglas 1966:164), she argues:

[D]irt is essentially disorder. There is no such thing as absolute dirt: it exists in the eye of the beholder. [. . .] Dirt offends against order. Eliminating it is not a negative movement, but a positive effort to organise the environment (1966:2).

Perceptions of what is clean and unclean are contextually variable and culturally specific. Habits of cleanliness and rites of purification are the manifest expressions and protections of deep structures and fundamental classificatory schemes that maintain order and help hold a society together. People and actions that disturb order, violate categories, mess up the system are branded unclean: “The unclear is the unclean” (Turner 1967:97). Labeling someone or something “dirty” is a way of controlling perceived anomalies, incongruities, contradictions, ambiguities—all that does not fit into our categories, and therefore threatens cherished principles. “Dirt,” then, functions as the mediating term between “Difference” and “Danger.” It is the term that loads the perception of “Difference” with a moral imperative, and enables the move from description to action, from “is” to “ought.” Defining something as unhealthy, harmful, dangerous establishes the premise for “moving in,” for control, making it “licit to intervene [. . .] in order to exercise the rights of guardianship [. . .] to impose ‘the good’ on others” (Todorov 1984:150). Perception, language, and politics cathect in the encounter with the Other: “the perception of the other and that of symbolic (or semiotic) behavior intersect” (Todorov 1984:157; see also Foucault 1973; Said 1979).

The communication between expatriate camp officials and the refugees in Ban Vinai is so clouded by the perceptual transformations which I call the Difference-Disorder-Dirt-Danger Sliding Continuum, that other explanations for the poor health conditions of the camp get filtered out. I quote a revealing passage from one of the monthly reports submitted to the Bangkok office by a Ban Vinai health officer:

Three refugees in Center Five had just died before my arrival. [. . .] We walked around that area. It was muddy; piled with garbage, sticks thrown behind toilets and sludge appeared from place to place. [Agency] garbage pits and sewage treatment lagoons were situated above and close to the buildings. “It’s a horrible smell when the wind blows especially from that garbage pit down to our houses, sometimes we can’t eat anymore,” [a refugee said]. [. . .] [He] asked me to convey this problem to [the agency], hoping we could move the pits to another place. However, [the agency] can’t move it at all because of the limitations of land and budget.

This is a remarkable passage. After the obligatory fecal imagery of the toilets, mud, sludge, and ooze, there is almost a recognition scene. The health official notes the “garbage pits” and “sewage treatment lagoons” his agency has situated dangerously close to the living quarters. The refugee accompanying him on this site tour follows up on the perception and complains. We are presented with a marvelous glimpse of a refugee talking back to a camp official, resisting the unhealthy and degrading circumstances in which he and his people are caught. The responsibility for the problem almost gets shifted from the refugees to the environment, with the expatriate agencies even held accountable for contributing to the creation of a harmful scene.

This rupture in the discursive text about refugees gets sealed off quickly, however. Scarcely a page later, the perceptual blinders are back in place:

“Even though some have had public health training, it is evident that the training has had little effect—their homes are untidy and stuffy and their children are dirty. They have no picture of community.” We are comfortably refocused on the dirtiness of the refugees. This ideology of blaming the victims, and thereby legitimizing domination and control over them, is displayed transparently in the final section of the report, ominously subtitled “Submission for Discipline”:

We all realize that even though lots of refugees have been trained about hygiene and sanitation by volags [voluntary agencies], they still behave as they used to. [. . .] No refugees really take care of the environment. [. . .] They live freely wandering around without any responsibility.

In my own opinion it’ll take a long time to change their habits which detract from their health. One thing that might help is a ‘system of discipline’. [. . .] For example, the refugees can be told what will happen if they throw garbage everywhere, defecate into the streams, etc.

It’s an idea that we might think about carefully and which might work in the future.

This text is paradigmatic of the documents produced by the bureaucracy and institutional apparatus of refugee relief agencies. It is an avatar of the twin themes of discursive power and institutional control that Michel Foucault discussed in *The Birth of the Clinic: An Archaeology of Medical Perception* (1973) and *Discipline and Punish: The Birth of the Prison* (1977). Because the “limitation of land and budget” forecloses the consideration of infrastructural change in the camp environment, attention is diverted to the “change [of] their habits which detract from their good health.” Refugee subjects are discursively represented in a way that reduces them to the unhealthy and/or passive Other who is to be managed, administered, and if need be, changed. Their resistance, interpreted as recalcitrance, only legitimizes and further sustains the institutional power and authority that are enacted upon them. Harrell-Bond deconstructs the strange, self-reinforcing logic that underpins refugee programs in Africa where she did fieldwork: “Often interpretations of compassion seem to define those in need as helpless, and then work in ways which makes sure that they are useless” (1986:82).

One of the motives that would prompt doctors and nurses to volunteer for stressful work in an alien, harsh environment is concern for the refugees’ souls as well as their physical bodies. I heard horror story after horror story from the refugees about people who went to the hospital for treatment, but before being admitted had their spirit-strings cut from their wrists by a nurse because “the strings were unsanitary and carried germs.” Doctors confidently cut off neck-rings that held the life-souls of babies intact. Instead of working in cooperation with the shamans, they did everything to disconfirm them and undermine their authority. Shamans were regarded as “witch doctors.” Here are the views of a Finnish nurse who worked in Ban Vinai: “They have their bark and root medicines and rites to appease the spirits. Most of it is worthless, and some of it is positively harmful” (Evans 1983:111). Is it any wonder that the Hmong community regarded the camp hospital as the last choice of available health care options? In the local hierarchy of values, consulting a shaman or herbalist, or purchasing medicine available in the Thai market just outside

the entrance to the camp, was much preferred and more prestigious than going to the camp hospital. The refugees told me that only the very poorest people who had no relatives or resources whatsoever would subject themselves to the camp hospital treatment. To say that the camp hospital was underutilized would be an understatement.

As I critique my work in the camp I realize that I should have developed more consciousness-raising performances specifically for the expatriate health professionals. They needed to develop a critical awareness about health problems in the camp at least as much as did the Hmong. Directing most of the performances to the Hmong resulted in a one-sided communication campaign and subtly reinforced the prevailing notion that the Hmong were primarily responsible for the bad conditions.

I did develop one performance event that was designed especially for the agency health workers, the *IRC Health and Sanitation Celebration* (plates 21–23). All the voluntary agency personnel were invited to a showcase of skits from the refugee performance company culminating in a shared meal. The ostensible purpose of this event was to let the other agency workers know what we were doing so that they would not be surprised if they came across one of our health shows in the camp. The implicit agenda was to promote better understanding of Hmong culture and traditions. To this end, we capped the series of performance sketches by bringing a Hmong shaman on stage who enacted a traditional soul-calling ceremony of blessing and tied string around the wrists of expatriate personnel who voluntarily came up to the stage (plate 24). Given the history of hostility between shamans and the hospital, this was a radical move. Those who participated in this intercultural performance found it deeply moving. However, they were a small, self-selected group who were already the most open-minded. Most of the expatriate guests politely remained in their seats but observed attentively. The most dogmatic agency workers—for example, the Christian nurse who refused to allow any Thai calendars in her ward because they had pictures of the Buddha—did not even attend this event.

I should have been more assiduous in attempts to reach the expatriate personnel who were most ethnocentric in their dealings with the Hmong. My sympathies were with the refugees. My interests and energies were devoted to understanding and working with the Hmong. It was easier to identify with the Hmong; the dogmatic Christians became the Other for me.

It is important to speak out against the repressive practices of some refugee relief agencies, however, in the interest of searching for a solution to this sad situation, I do not want to substitute one scapegoat for another. I agree with Harrell-Bond that “it is unproductive to blame” the agency fieldworkers for the enormous communication breakdowns that occur in refugee camps. By nature a refugee camp is a highly volatile, stressful, politically intense, multicultural arena, usually located in a harsh environment. In matters of communication and intercultural sensitivity, relief workers “are not trained. Within the agency bureaucracy they are not rewarded for involving themselves with individuals. In fact, fieldworkers are often warned against ‘getting involved’ ” (1986:305). The agency workers I met in Ban Vinai were all dedicated, caring people. Even though they commuted to the camp from a Thai village an hour away, their living conditions there were quite basic. Many of the workers were volunteers, working in the camp at considerable personal sacrifice. The problem cannot be so easily contained at the level of the agency personnel. The root of the problem goes much deeper into institutional bureaucratic practices and the ideologies that empower and sustain them.

21. Program for the 1985 Health and Sanitation Celebration sponsored by the International Rescue Committee.

IRC Health and Sanitation Celebration

THEME

When you lived in the Mountains
The Wind and the Rain cleaned the Garbage.
Now with so many people in Ban Vinai
We all must be careful to clean up the Garbage

*Thaum peb nyob pem roob cua thiab nag
Tshoob yam khoom qias neeg pov tseg.
Tam sim no muaj neeg coob coob nyob hauv zos vib nai,
Peb txhua leej txhua tus yuav xyuam xim
Cheb yam khoom qias neeg kom huv si*

PROGRAM

1. SCENARIO—"Mother Clean and the Garbage Troll"—*Niam Tsev Huv*
2. SANDWICH BOARD DISPLAY OF POSTERS (thanks to JSRC)
3. DANCING FOOD—Singing Vegetables, Meat, and Fruit—*Yam Qav Noj Muaj Zog*
4. CHORUS OF CHILDREN—Tiny tots sing and dance a medley of sanitation songs
5. PANTOMIME—Enactment of Theme Message
6. STORY-BOARD THEATRE—*Nyam Huv Ntxim Siab*—"Housecleaning is Wonderful!" (a story adapted from the Yao the Orphan cycle of Hmong tales)
7. DEMONSTRATION OF GAME—*Yam Khoom Qhia Neeg*—"Flee the Garbage Dragon!"
8. SAMPLE BROADCAST AUDIOTAPE
9. *Hu Plig Khi Tes*—Traditional Hmong Ceremony of Blessing and String-Tying for participants, workers, and guests of IRC. The ceremony will be performed by Thoj Txooj Neeb, Hmong shaman
10. EVERYONE EAT AND ENJOY!



22. & 23. Singing and dancing zucchini and squash encourage children to eat their vegetables in the "Nutrition Show" for the 1985 Health and Sanitation Celebration. (Photos by Dwight Conquergood)



24. *A Hmong shaman stands on stage and prepares to tie spirit-strings around the wrists of Western agency relief workers attending the Health and Sanitation Celebration. (Photo by Lw Vang)*

The ideal is for the two cultures, refugees' and relief workers', to enter into a productive and mutually invigorating dialog, with neither side dominating or winning out, but both replenishing one another (see Bakhtin 1981). Intercultural performance can enable this kind of dialogical exchange between Self and Other. Eugenio Barba talks about performance as "barter":

Otherness is our point of departure. Imagine two very different tribes, each on their own side of the river. Each tribe can live for itself, talk about the other, praise or slander it. But every time one of them rows over to the other shore it is to exchange something. One does not row over to teach, to enlighten, to entertain, but rather to give and take: a handful of salt for a scrap of cloth. [. . .] Otherness is our meeting point (1986:161).

As a medium of exchange, performance draws us to the margins, the borders between Self and Other. Bakhtin affirms: "The most intense and productive life of culture takes place on the boundaries" (1986:2). Conceived of as barter, a site of exchange, performance is a key to understanding "how the deeply different can be deeply known without becoming any less different" (Geertz 1983:48). The value of the exchange is in the encounter, the relations that are produced, not the objects: "It is the act of exchanging that gives value to that which is exchanged, and not the opposite" (Barba 1986:268).

Postscript

I returned to Camp Ban Vinai for a brief follow-up visit in September 1987, anxious to see what had become of Mother Clean and the Ban Vinai Performance Company during the two years since my departure. IRC had hired a Thai university graduate who worked with me on the health education program and she was to take over the project after I left. Although she left IRC to work for another agency in the camp, Mother Clean and the performance approach to working with refugees survived this transfer to another agency. I was delighted to see that Mother Clean had been fully integrated into the culture of Camp Ban Vinai. Literacy textbooks produced in the camp print shop were illustrated with images of Mother Clean (plate 25). Mother Clean hand puppets were made in the camp and used for entertainment and instruction (plate 26). Mother Clean puzzles delighted children (plate 27). The ultimate test was that Mother Clean had been invited by the Hmong leaders to perform at the New Year Festivities, the most important and elaborate celebration of Hmong culture.

The character had been through three reincarnations and several performers in the two years I had been gone. Two bamboo frames and costumes had been worn out by heavy use. Her yarn hair was more purple than I had remembered it, but other than that she looked very much the same as when I left in 1985. I was pleased to see her again, as well as the young man who currently performed her (plate 28). Nuanjan Charn-wiwatana, the Thai worker in charge of the program after I left, told me that during her change of employment from IRC to another agency, there was a period of time when Mother Clean did not perform. She said that children would come to the IRC office in camp and ask worriedly, "Where is Mama Clean? Is Mama Clean sick?" And they had begun to ask about Mother Clean's children. Construction was underway during my visit for a child-sized Mother Clean, and the performance company talked of eventually having a Mother Clean family. Mother Clean's success as a communicator had reached personnel in other refugee camps, and I was told that she had been cloned for some of these.

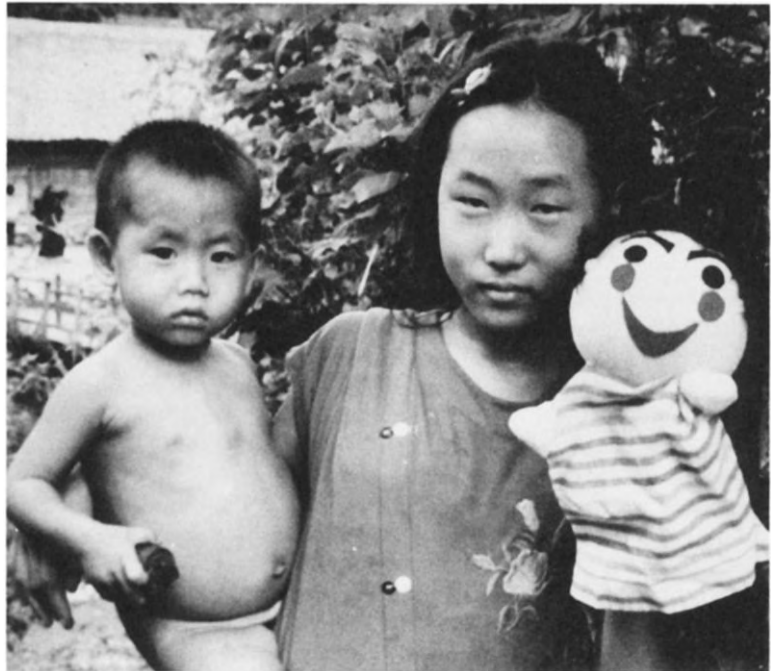
A new participatory theatre strategy was highly successful: Mother Clean now made home visits. The performers were quite confident with the character and could improvise lines that directly addressed the problems of a particular household or neighborhood in the camp. These home visits also involved a great deal of interaction between Mother Clean and her hosts. The home visits were still highly entertaining because Mother Clean would have to maneuver her considerable bulk through the crowded living quarters and underneath low-hanging thatched eaves. This required a good deal of awkward bending and turning on Mother Clean's part and sometimes she would get stuck in a narrow passageway, to the glee of the onlookers.

It was heartening to see Mother Clean still being performed by Hmong actors, supporting Hmong identity, and blending with Hmong cultural traditions which still flourished in the camp. My return visit was celebrated by a shamanic performance. Hmong friends positioned me on a shaman's bench in front of his altar, tied me with a cord to a live pig, while the shaman circled me chanting and beating a gong. The pig's souls were released on my behalf through a deft cut at the throat, while the shaman covered his face with a dark veil and entered ecstatic trance, leaping back and forth between the bench and the ground.

25. By 1987 *Mother Clean* is used to illustrate a literacy textbook designed for the refugees in Camp Ban Vinai. (Photo by Dwight Conquergood)



26. A big sister uses a *Mother Clean* hand puppet to entertain and teach her brother about healthy living in the camp (1987). (Photo by Dwight Conquergood)



27. A *Mother Clean* puzzle made by refugee craftspeople in Camp Ban Vinai (1987). (Photo by Dwight Conquergood)

Conditions had not improved in the camp since 1985. If anything, the camp was even more tense. There was a new camp commander who imposed more rules and restrictions. The presence of soldiers was greater. Throughout my stay during 1985 I was never stopped by the military. My second day in camp during the return visit I was challenged by a patrol. The camp was even more crowded, particularly with "illegals," estimated to be as many as 10,000. Still, it was gratifying to see the *Mother Clean* character bringing some joy to the camp inmates, particularly the children, while attempting to address in a positive way the difficult situation.



28. Mother Clean and the refugee performer who was playing her character during 1987. (Photo by Dwight Conquergood)

Notes

1. More than 100 Hmong refugees, almost all men, have died suddenly. Autopsy reports show no cause of death (see Holtan 1984; Munger 1986).
2. *Helping Health Workers Learn* should be read as a model of praxis. It is designed for village health workers, but it has much to say about action and reflection, the development of a critical consciousness. Although the authors draw extensively on the methods of Freire, they provide an incisive critique of his work. I recommend this book particularly for academics whose social and critical theories get abstracted from the lived struggles of poor people.
3. Through the Freedom of Information Act a CIA film depicting the recruitment, training, and guerilla warfare of the Hmong in Laos is now available. This media text documents how the Hmong were recruited and used by the CIA during the war in Southeast Asia. It sets forth vividly the political-historical circumstances that led ultimately to the Hmong becoming refugees.

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