Belonging
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Belonging:
The Social Dynamics of Fitting in as Experienced by Hmong Refugees in Germany and Texas
Faith G. Nibbs
Belonging

The Social Dynamics of Fitting in as Experienced by Hmong Refugees in Germany and Texas

Faith G. Nibbs
Contents

List of Figures ix

Series Editors’ Preface
Negotiating Life and Displacement: Refugees, Identities, and Emplacement
Andrew Strathern & Pamela J. Stewart xi

Acknowledgments xv

List of Abbreviations xvii

Introduction 3
Why Belonging? 6
Refugees: Helpless Victims or Active Agents? 10
Locality, Intersections and Scale 12
Methods 14
An Outline of Chapters 17

Chapter 1 · The Hmong: Pre-Resettlement History of Movement, Belonging, and Culture 19
Early Historical Accounts 20
Migration into Southeast Asia and Laos 22
The Beginning of Refugeehood 26
Liminality and the Thai Refugee Camps 28
Registration 30
Clearance 31
Approved Entry 32
Exit through Bangkok 33
Hmong Concepts of Belonging 34
## CONTENTS

Chapter 2 · Two Hmong Resettlement Communities:
The Context of Reception 43
   Gammertingen, Germany 44
   The Dallas/Fort Worth Metroplex 53

Chapter 3 · Policies, Politics, and National Belonging 61
   Background to U.S. Refugee Policy 63
   Background to German Refugee Policy 65
   From Nationals to Citizens 68
   Rights, Responsibilities, Belonging, and Location: A Complicated Relationship 75
   Reconciling Citizenship and Belonging 85

Chapter 4 · Making Members: Institutional Constraints, Agency, and Local Belonging 89
   Sponsorship 94
   Local Discourses and Public Assistance 106
   Ingenuity and Agency 122

Chapter 5 · Religious Institutions: Intervening Mechanisms of Belonging 125
   Hmong Traditional Religion 126
   Gammertingen and Religious Member-Making 128
   DFW and Religious Member-Making 136
   Flexibility and Improvisations 140
   Localized Identity in Expressions of Faith 146
   Making It or Being Made? 149

Chapter 6 · Growing Pains: Negotiating Co-Ethnic Belonging 153
   Gammertingen 155
   Dallas/Fort Worth 168
   A Doubleness of Similarity 177

Chapter 7 · Mapping Hmong Networks: Diasporic Belonging 179
   The Hmong Diaspora 182
   Political Activism in the Diaspora 183
   Media Technology 190
      Video 191
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>CONTENTS</th>
<th>vii</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Satellite Television</td>
<td>196</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Cyberspace</td>
<td>197</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Celebration, Ritual, and Festival Performances</td>
<td>204</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Wedding Ceremonies</td>
<td>205</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Funeral Rituals</td>
<td>209</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>New Year’s Celebrations</td>
<td>212</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Being Hmong: An Ongoing Formation</td>
<td>214</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Chapter 8 · Implications: Belonging, Place, and Scale</strong></td>
<td>219</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Appendix</td>
<td>225</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>References</td>
<td>227</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Index</td>
<td>247</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
List of Figures

Figure 1.1 Map of Hmong Camps 29
Figure 1.2 Camp “Mug Shots” 30
Figure 1.3 Traditional Hmong Ball Toss 39
Figure 2.1 Map of Gammertingen 45
Figure 2.2 Ethnic Composition, Gammertingen 1980 48
Figure 2.3 Gammertingen Village 51
Figure 2.5 Initial German-Hmong Refugees 52
Figure 2.6 Refugee Dormitory 52
Figure 2.4 Map of DFW 53
Figure 2.7 Map of DFW Townships 54
Figure 2.8 Ethnic Composition Dallas/Fort Worth Area 1980 55
Figure 3.1 Self-Described Hmong Identity 81
Figure 4.1 Evening Walks with Germans 104
Figure 4.2 Dinner with Sponsors 105
Figure 4.3 Hmong Homes in Gammertingen 111
Figure 5.1 Evangelisch Hmong Celebration 132
Figure 5.2 Membership Service at Evangelisch Church 133
Figure 5.3 Pa Ndau Hanging in Evangelisch Church 134
Figure 5.4 German Hmong House Church 136
Figure 5.5 Hmong Cultural Church Items 148
Figure 7.1 Hmong Videos for Sale at a Sport Festival Event 213
Refugees, in one sense and another, are a salient part of the global flow of persons today. They are a very special part of that flow for at least two reasons. First, they are displaced from their homes and do not, in principle, have access to return there. Second, they have to seek a special status in the places they migrate to, one that marks them out as marginal persons, particularly
dependent on those who take them in. Do refugees in fact find refuge? And how do they recreate their lives?

One concept that we have deployed in this rich arena of studies is that of transplacement (Strathern and Stewart 2006; Stewart and Strathern 2005, 2007). What we label as migration entails not just a movement of people through space, but their movement from one place to another, in search of work, money, freedom, community or whatever aims they may have for their future. There is also a dimension of time, with the idea that the migrant is moving from a past which they seek to leave behind towards a future that they are seeking to find or make for themselves. Since such a future can be made only by recreating their emplacement in the world and since they are always leaving a specific place, the ritual of migration, like a classic rite of passage, has a tripartite structure, from emplacement to displacement to re-emplacement. This whole process we call transplacement. It is full of contingencies, hazards, sometimes failures, and compromises, and varies with the conditions of placement and the determination and resources of the migrants.

Such a model of transplacement lends itself well to a comparative study such as Dr. Nibbs has carried out in the present volume. The novelty and strength of her contribution is that she has studied Laotian Hmong refugee resettlement communities in two very different places: Gammertingen in Germany and Dallas/Fort Worth in the USA. She focuses on the migrant refugees’ own senses of belonging in their places of resettlement. With this focus, she also pays attention to the agency of people because the sense of belonging is not something given or passively accepted but has to be actively constructed by the settlers themselves, in dialectic with state structures and local cultural practices. Scaling is important here, because people exercise agency within, and are constrained by, different scales of relationships depending on the contexts of interaction. At what scales, for example, is belonging most crucially developed? Language capacities also make a big difference. Nibbs found that it was important for her work to marshal a lexicon of some 20 key words through which immigrants could express their feelings of belonging, either in a German village or in the Texas, USA context. She realized, too, that religion was a factor in determining how the refugees achieve belonging, and that they had to learn to exercise flexibility in adapting their own indigenous religious ideas to Christian cultural modalities. Finally, the politics of power and placement play a big role. Scattering Hmong in pockets separated from one another with varying access to resources works to negate Hmong indigenous understanding of locality and power, because they are not on their own land. Nevertheless, the refugees in Gammertingen were able to use aspects of their own material cul-
ture to integrate themselves in with the local church there, by giving a large piece of embroidered fabric showing Hmong history and value orientations as a present to their local pastor, who then hung the cloth in the church. Conflicts remained, in both localities, on the questions of veneration for ancestors and the healing roles of shamanic specialists.

In nuanced context after context Dr. Nibbs explores the cross-currents of influence that enhance or constrain the trends of belonging available to the refugees. Because one set are based in a European village and the other in a U.S. city (Dallas/Fort Worth), macro-differences of history and culture between the receiving populations entail continuous thoughtful exposition on the author’s part. In terms of the study’s theoretical impact, the discussion of scaling stands out, but it does so only because it is a product of extensive and intensive fine-grained local ethnography. In the theoretical terms that we ourselves have used here, transplacement seen as a process of initiation is gradually turned by a myriad of practical, material actions into forms of embodied emplacement. Dr. Nibbs’ study of this process which she calls “belonging” will place it in the forefront of scholarship on resettlement and re-scaling of relationships, and the many poignant aspects of her account make it comparable to a classic work, Anne Sigfrid Grönseth’s monograph *Lost Selves and Lonely Persons* (2010).

**References**


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LIST OF ABBREVIATIONS

AFDC     Aid to Families to Dependent Children
DFW      the Dallas/Fort Worth Metroplex
ESL      English as a Second Language
GSL      German as a Second Language
ICE      Immigration and Customs Enforcement
INS      Immigration and Naturalization Service
IRC      International Rescue Committee
MAA      Mutual Assistance Agency
MAPDC    Hmong-American Planning and Develop Corporation
NGO      Non-Governmental Organization
ORR      Office of Refugee Resettlement
SES      Social Economic Service
SPD      Social Democratic Party of Germany
SPSS     Statistical Package for the Social Sciences
UNHCR    United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees
VOLAG    Voluntary Resettlement Agency