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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



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SERIES EDITORS' PREFACE

NEGOTIATING LIFE AND DISPLACEMENT: REFUGEES, IDENTITIES, AND EMPLACEMENT

*Andrew Strathern & Pamela J. Stewart**

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

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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 Grønseth's monograph *Lost Selves and Lonely Persons* (2010).

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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