

Press-Telegram

THE BOY FROM THE OTHER SIDE

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From her linoleum throne on the rec room floor, Yang Neang fans her infant great-granddaughter. At first, it's hard to believe the old woman is possessed.

While the baby sleeps on the floor beside her, the beloved matriarch contentedly chews betel nuts and hurls the juice into a makeshift spittoon. She spits with guttural gusto and smiles, an expression that reveals a mouthful of blackened teeth.

As people of all ages drift in and out of her four-bedroom Pomona home, a 2-year-old great-grandson climbs into her lap for a love pat and a slurp of water from a plastic water pistol.

It's hot, too hot to do much more than wave a paper fan. It's already close to 90 degrees and it's only 11 a.m. It's considerably hotter outside. An old gentleman in swimming trunks mumbles something in Cambodian and shuffles out to the back yard to cool off with a garden hose.

All morning a tribe of 12 relatives and visitors have gathered in the room to chat and laze with Neang. On a typical day, many are members of the Cambodian community in Long Beach. Others including Laotians and Vietnamese come from as far away as Melbourne and Paris for a dose of Neang's off-beat advice on a business deal or marriage.

In the Cambodian community, Neang is known as a kru Khmer, a revered channeler and healer who is said to have the power to contact transcendent realms for information from the spirit world. Neang herself does not give advice or make predictions. She is merely a conduit of information.

For most of the day, she is a content and playful grandma who likes to kaffeeklatsch with neighbors and friends, preferring tea and Camels to Folgers.

Then something happens, something staggering. After careful preparation and meditation, Neang becomes a 7-year-old boy/god. The Boy, who is said to have lived seven centuries ago in the great temples of Angkor Wat, inhabits her 65-year-old body.

He is a spirit who can see and sense things mortals cannot. He can figure out the source of family problems. He can cure physical ills. He can offer blessings. He can make friendly predictions. He can tell fortunes. He can level frightening warnings.

Woe to those who do not obey. He once warned the wife of a severely depressed man, "If you don't take care of him, he will hang himself tomorrow." The wife did not heed The Boy's prediction. The man hanged himself the next day.

There is nothing new about Neang's line of work. Channelers and healers and other consciousness-altering practitioners have been delivering supernatural wisdom worldwide for some 50,000 years. The expertise of these intuitive sages, often called

shamans, ranges from mundane medical matters such as curing a wart to complex psychological tasks such as repairing a broken heart.

"The more we explore shamanism, the more it points to unrecognized aspects and potentials of the human body, mind, and spirit," Roger Walsh concludes in "The Spirit of Shamanism." "For untold thousands of years the spirit of shamanism has helped, healed, and taught humankind, and it may have still more to offer us."

Walsh, a professor of psychiatry at the University of California/Irvine, says the recent surge of interest in ancient healing and spiritual practices reflects many Western cultural changes. These include a growing interest in non-Western cultures, a deep concern about the condition of the planet, a longing for a more cooperative, less competitive society, a profound search for spiritual meaning.

He calls shamans tribal GPs, and says they have too readily been dismissed as weirdos by the Western psychiatric community. It's true many healers do exhibit bizarre behavior. Some, like Neang, hear voices and speak in strange dialects, behavior that can look a whole lot more like severe schizophrenia than spiritual acuity.

Some are con men and charlatans. Still, Dr. Walsh says many shamans are helpful, sensitive, intuitive healers. They make people feel better. Many of their techniques are founded in sound psychological principles. And they often provide a more holistic, ecology-oriented world view than many Western religious traditions.

Space for The Boy

For the past two hours, Yang Neang has been content to care for her great-grandchildren and hold court with friends. Now she is ready to go on a soul flight. The clients and friends who have been lounging on the floor or sprawled out on the velveteen couches begin to sit up and take notice as Neang shows the first signs of checking out of the material world to allow The Boy a place to dwell.

First comes the snuff. Neang trades the betel nuts for a wad of fresh tobacco that she crams under her tongue. She paints a thick red paste concoction on dry green leaves and alternately chews and spits the various plants and betel nuts, a mild stimulant that comes from the fruit of a betel palm.

In about half an hour she is ready to step into the shrine room, a dazzling alcove adjacent to the rec room that is decorated from matted floor to purple foil ceiling with an astonishing assortment of colorful objects ranging from incense that grows out of carved coconut husks to red and green silk Christmas ornaments.

Now Neang is feeling good. She sits cross-legged in front of the shrine within reach of a personal vanity, a collection of perfumes, a shocking pink lipstick, a comb, a couple of \$20 bills (the standard fee for services), a Bic lighter and a pack of Camels. She lights a clump of red candles. She combs her short black hair straight back, sprays herself with perfume, spits, presses her palms to her forehead and momentarily disappears into a deep meditative state.

While she is "away," her friends sit close enough to fan her. A neighbor settles in directly behind her with an igloo of ice, chunks of which she crunches with abandon.

The atmosphere is alive with anticipation. Kim Soun Thik, a 59-year-old woman who has battled chronic depression since her daughter was executed by Khmer Rouge revolutionaries in the late '70s, has spent most of the morning staring blankly into space.

Now she is fully engaged.

All of a sudden and with a dramatic thud, Neang falls forward. Her hands protect her head from hitting the floor. Her clients, all of whom have been here before, are surprised and delighted. Em Chhouk, the middle-aged neighbor who's crunching the ice, laughs appreciatively.

Apparently, The Boy has arrived. He stretches. He wipes his face with a red silk hanky. He spits.

Pin San, a pretty 24-year-old woman from Los Angeles who has become a regular, helps The Boy tie a long red scarf around his head. The Boy sprays himself and the candles with cologne, applies the shocking pink lipstick, lights a cigarette and laughs, laughs a silly 7-year-old laugh.

He winks. He flirts. He speaks rapidly in a singsong voice. He places a candle in a dish of water and magically makes it stand. He is master performer, wit and clown. And, for the next hour and a half, he holds people's hands and talks to them about issues large and small.

Richer San, a 31-year-old Long Beach man who is business manager at the United Cambodian Community Inc., asks The Boy about a trip to Cambodia. Yes, it's O.K. to go, The Boy allows. But don't consider moving there permanently for at least three years. Pin San talks to The Boy about a recent car accident. Her mother, Kim Soun Thik, is reassured that it wasn't her fault, the insurance company will come through, all will be well.

By the time The Boy removes the red scarf and disappears, spirits are high. Connections have been made, stress relieved. Even Richer San, who says he's not a believer, says he feels happier, more relaxed. Like many of Neang's younger clients, he is respectful of the kru tradition. He says he deeply appreciates how much better his mother feels after a pilgrimage to Pamona.

He talks about what a very difficult time Neang had during the Khmer Rouge reign of terror. Three of her five children were killed. Now she helps so many people, particularly older Cambodians whose grief is profound.

"She relieves stress," he says simply.

Adds Sakphan Keam, a businessman who owns a translation bureau in Long Beach: "For me, it is just a show. But many people go because it makes them feel better, less worried. She is a good and faithful person and a good model. She has understanding. She creates power like a rock star or politician only on a smaller scale. When people go to her, all of their senses are touched. The incense, the statues, the perfume, the candles are powerful stimuli.

"She gets in people's minds. She gives them attention. They surrender."

As the believers return to reality, the rec room doesn't seem as hot. A man who had spent the morning zonked out on a couch now talks to his wife. The woman with igloo and a friend speak to visitors for the first time.

The charismatic grandmother with the blackened teeth returns to her linoleum throne. A naked great-grandchild plops into her lap. She holds him for a moment then sets him on his feet. He wanders off.

She is satisfied. She lights a Camel and has a long, solitary smoke.