

Tucked into a quiet residential corner of Lakewood, the yellow three-bedroom house resembles any of a thousand middle-class dwellings in suburban Southern California. The lawn is neatly trimmed, the patio properly endowed with comfortable backyard furniture.

On the porch, however, dozens of empty shoes left neatly in rows provide the first hint of incongruity. Walking through the door is like entering a different world.

Welcome to Khemara Buddhikaram, the area's largest and oldest Cambodian Buddhist temple. Inside, the air smells of incense and boiling rice. In what was the living room, a four-foot golden statue of the Buddha sits amid an abundance of candles, flowers and blinking red lights. Kneeling before it—some wearing white or saffron robes, their heads shaven—the owners of the shoes sit chanting a rhythmic, almost musical, incantation that to the untrained ear sounds decidedly other-worldly.

Would Go Back to Cambodia

"If there were no temple," said Doung Chea, 72, speaking through an interpreter, "I would go back to Cambodia."

Indeed, this unobtrusive suburban shrine and one other like it have become the heart of the 50,000-strong Cambodian community in Los Angeles County. Many of the immigrants, like Chea, fled their native land to escape the harsh communist regime of Pol Pot.

More than houses of worship, the refugees say, the temples are major cultural centers providing much-needed community cohesion and service in an area that has become the unofficial Cambodian capital of America. And in a very real sense, they say, the shrines are at the center of the restoration and preservation of the traditional Cambodian or Khmer culture, which was suppressed under communism.

"I just cannot over-emphasize their importance to the Cambodian community," said Nil Hul, executive director of the Cambodian Assn. of America. "They are the backbone of our culture and society."

In pre-communist Cambodia, according to Hul, Buddhist pagodas—each consisting of a temple, religious school, meeting hall and living quarters—dotted the landscape. It was there that the populace, 95% of which was Buddhist, came to worship, educate their children, receive counseling and advice, and in some cases physical shelter. Sort of churches, schools and city halls rolled into one, Cambodians say, the pagodas were the treasure troves of the country's culture, art, architecture, history and social welfare.

Beginning in 1975 when Pol Pot took over, the Buddhist monasteries were systematically destroyed and most of the monks overseeing them executed. Although the Vietnamese communists who took power in 1979 are

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"At this point we have no possibilities," said Bill Martinez, president of the local. "It's all exploratory."

So the Cambodian Buddhists squeeze into their two small temples, often looking to them for the comfort and guidance required by immigrants in a new land.

Buddhist philosophy, Kong says, emphasizes rational and moral living—qualities he believes are essential to his people's survival in America. "It's very very important," said Than Pok, executive director of United Cambodia Community and a board member at the Lakewood temple. "When you feel depressed or down, the monk can lift you up."

And indeed, no depression was evident in the faces of the chanting worshipers at a recent service there, one of the regular weekly gatherings held on various days according to the lunar calendar.

"It's important to remember our old traditions," said Chanthy Yi, 21, glancing at a table strewn with platters of fish, pork, cabbage soup, hard-boiled eggs, noodles and shrimp. "There's value in togetherness."

Togetherness with the neighbors has not been a problem. Nevertheless, local "rednecks" occasionally drive by and hurl rotten eggs and racial epithets at the Buddhists, a neighbor said. And congested parking conditions have upset some nearby homeowners.

Lakewood spokesman Don Waldie said that the city has received no complaints about the temple or the parking.

And for the most part, the neighbors' reactions have ranged from complete obliviousness to benign acceptance.

"I've seen them walking around in their robes, but I never knew what they represented," said Vera Marzolf, 69, who has lived in the house next door for 11 years but only recently learned from a re-

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slightly more permissive, Hul said, the practice of Buddhism is still not encouraged in his native land.

But the Cambodian refugees who began settling in Long Beach—there are nearly 28,000 in that city and Lakewood—brought their religion with them. And in 1982, Rev. Chhean Kong—a Buddhist monk with a Ph.D. in philosophy and a master's degree in family counseling—founded the Khemara Buddhikaram to cater to their needs.

"When they come to the temple they feel relaxed and happy," said Kong, who raised the \$112,500 purchase price for the Lakewood property by selling community shares at \$50 apiece.

Today, he says, there are eight Cambodian Buddhist monks based in Long Beach or Lakewood, two more than the number of rabbis. Kong says he is aware of one other permanent Cambodian temple in the area, in a private home in downtown Long Beach. Because the only other Southern California temples are in Santa Ana and San Diego, the monk says, his services draw people from as far away as Van Nuys, Stockton and Bakersfield.

While major celebrations such as the Cambodian New Year in April, Ceremony of the Ancestors in September and Water Festival in November are held in El Dorado Park and attract as many as 2,000 people, Kong said, the average attendance at Khemara Buddhikaram's daily meditation sessions is 30.

"Sometimes some of them sleep here," said Kong, who lives at the temple with two other monks and has provided temporary shelter for as many as 15 homeless Cambodians at a time. In addition to offering religious services, he said, the temple acts as sort of an adult day care center for about 20 elderly parents of working Cambodians who drop them off in the morning and pick them up at night.

Kong said he hopes to increase the services he and other monks provide by the \$1.1-million purchase of a 91,000-square foot facility in West Long Beach that would, ~~among other things, accommodate~~ a school, playground, teen center, social and cultural center and worship hall for 1,000 people.

While Cambodian leaders say they already have raised money for a down payment and anticipate no problem in raising the rest, negotiations have been stalled for a year while the owners—the Oil, Chemical and Atomic Workers International Union Local 1-128 which uses the site as its headquarters—seeks new meeting facilities for its 2,500 members.

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porter that her neighbors were Buddhists. "I don't bother them and they don't bother me."

And what of the strange incantations periodically emanating from the yellow house with the shoes piled on its porch?

"We accept it," said Larry Merrill, 23, a devout Christian who lives on the other side and attends a church where people speak in tongues. "We make some pretty weird ~~boards ourselves~~"