Chapter Five: Immigrant Communities as Resources for Emancipation
A Comparison of Bounded Solidarity in Two Cambodian Communities

5.1 Introduction

The turbulence of a civil war (1970-1975), the Khmer Rouge takeover (1975-1979) and the Vietnamese intervention (1979-1989) forced many Cambodians into exile. Among the nations that offered refuge, America and France stand out for the number of Cambodia refugees that were accepted for resettlement (Chan 2004, Ong 2003). Since 1975, both host-countries have been the recipient of three chronological waves of Cambodian refugees. Two relatively small waves of Cambodians that left Cambodia either before or during the Khmer Rouge take-over in 1975, and a larger wave of refugees entering countries of resettlement after 1979 when the Khmer Rouge regime was overthrown by Vietnamese intervention.

In the 35 years that have passed ever since, these groups of resettling Cambodians have formed communities all over France and the United States. Amidst other immigrant communities, these refugees have established social networks of Cambodian people and organizations that reach out to institutions in host countries and that have played a role in their social adaptation to a different way of life. In what ways, and to what effect, the Cambodian community organizations have contributed to a sense of solidarity among their members, building social capital and enabling the communities’ to provide extra resources for social adaptation, however, has hardly been a subject of research (for exceptions see, for instance: Chan 2003 and 2004). In order to explore this question, in this article, perceptions of community members and leaders in the Cambodian community in Long Beach (CA), USA are described and compared to those of the Cambodian community in Lyon, France. This is relevant as the comparison of the experiences of a shared sense of solidarity in these two localities may provide important insights into the impact of institutional structures and national ideologies on immigrant social adaptation as well as the span of community leaders’ agency in bringing together an immigrant community. Also, the description of Cambodian refugees’ communities finally brings attention to this little researched group of refugees and may contribute to discussions on immigrant communities as resources for their emancipation.

This article takes as a starting point that Cambodian refugees’ resettlement is sustained, primarily, by their immigrant communities (Moya 2005). Social adaptation is understood here as the way in which people learn to survive in a new socio-cultural context. This is considered a primary requirement for effective resettlement (Dermot, Dooley and Benson 2008: 2). An immigrant community may provide the resources for social adaptation through organizing solidarity in a social network of voluntary and autonomous social organizations that are part of civil society. The function of this social network is to provide services or collective goods for the immigrant group in a specific geographic location, however, it may bring other benefits and barriers to processes of social adaptation (Fennema 2004: 2-9). Also, structures of opportunity for the immigrants groups and their communities are shaped by larger social, economic and political factors.

---

1 This is an Author’s Original Manuscript of an article whose final and definitive form, the Version of Record, has been published in the Journal of Migration and Development (2013), Taylor and Francis Journals, available online at: http://www.tandfonline.com/doi/abs/10.1080/21632324.2013.773154
external to these localities (Gold 1992: 14). While acknowledging the importance of individual skills, resources and interests in explaining levels of social adaptation, it is assumed here that the effectiveness of the transition from refugee to citizen is connected most readily to the quality and strength of their social network as they try and engage in collective action (Erdmans 1998: 8).

To inquire into the, embedded, social relations of the Cambodian French and Cambodian American returnees, networks are operationalized by the social capital that is inherently part of networks and derived from it. Authors have treated these social relations and the social capital they create mostly as a positive force (See, for instance: Coleman 1988, Uzzi 1997, Woolcock 1998, or Putnam 1993). However, I propose that they can be structures of both constraint and opportunity that are negotiated and reinforced in the dynamics of interacting individuals. To inquire into the, embedded, social relations of the Cambodian French and Cambodian American returnees both the constructive as well as the destructive attributes of the social capital related to bounded solidarity are explored. Social capital is thus used as a ‘thinking tool’ (Bourdieu and Wacquant 1992: 23).

The idea of “bounded solidarity” is pivotal in this discussion (Portes and Sensenbrenner 1993: 1329-1333). This is an insider’s belief in the collective fate of an immigrant group. Bounded solidarity is understood as a mechanism by which social ties are turned into sources of social capital for in-group members. It is proposed that the interior perceptions on membership of an immigrant network are an important factor in the willingness of other members to bestow benefits or restrictions upon their fellow group members.

Resettled Cambodians’ experiences were collected by conducting semi-structured interviews with informants in Lyon, France, in 2010 and in Long Beach (CA), USA, in 2011. They were asked, for instance, in what way their community organizations were created and operated; who played important roles in their establishment and to what effect; as well as how they, themselves, have perceived institutional support in their reception in France and the United States. This information was complemented with data from published and non-published written sources such as archives, personal biographies, academic and secondary literature.

Informants of this research are selected from first generation Cambodians in Long Beach and Lyon, those born in Cambodia, who entered the United States or France before 1979. On four themes that were manifest in data-analysis of the interviews: resettlement infrastructure, reception by the public, Cambodian communities and community leadership, Cambodian American experiences are compared to those of first generation Cambodian French community members of the same, first two, waves. These groups were chosen, and may be distinguished in the Cambodian refugee community, in general, by their relative independence in resettlement, their language proficiency, the cultural awareness displayed of their new surroundings as well as their social belonging to the Cambodian middle and upper classes (Chan 2004, Mignot 1984). Explicitly, I have chosen to highlight the Long Beach situation and extensively illustrate the American findings in this article with excerpts from interviews and other documentation. The comparison with France is limited to reflections and general overviews due to, among others, the already extensive description of the reception of Cambodian refugees in prior publications (Wijers 2011) as well as the limited registration on Cambodian communities in governmental and other French sources.

Findings show a decidedly negative perception of the own community as well as a negative portrayal of its organizations by many of its members in Long Beach. In this Cambodian community there is relatively little sense of bounded solidarity. This is not to say there is no sense of solidarity, it just appears in changing
coalitions and is aimed at groupings within and outside the community. The competition with other American migrant groups and ideological conflict on homeland politics, especially, have been salient motivators for action. In these cases, pre- and post-settlement as well as current Cambodian and American political affiliations are still influential in the choices for cooperation and community participation as well as restrictions of access initiated by community leaders. The social networks thus hold both positive and negative social capital for community action. **It is proposed that the Cambodian American community organizations are not entirely effective vehicles for helping immigrants to adapt to life in the USA but, instead, bring back political conflicts from the homeland.**

In Lyon, also, familiar cultural models were replicated within the boundaries set by French governmental policy. The educated middle- and upper-classes that were already firmly embedded in France have been important facilitators of this process (Wijers 2011). Thus, the hybrid social structure of the resettled Cambodian refugees in France is firmly rooted in traditional Cambodian society while finding ways to cater to refugee needs (Ebihara, Mortland and Ledgerwood 1994, Moya 2005). In contrast to the manifest political activism and animosity in Long Beach, in many ways, the Cambodian middle class that resettled in Lyon felt they were mostly responsible for the conservation of ‘true’ Khmer culture. They initiated Buddhist organizations and re-established the role of the pagoda, that is still central to Cambodian French community life. Diversity and limited bounded solidarity are also hallmarks of the Cambodian French community. In their case there seems less need for collective action toward larger society as the Cambodian French consider themselves ‘well integrated’ while holding on to aspects of their Cambodian identity. Despite their Khmer pride, the members of the Cambodian community lead a life “in the shadows” of French society (Prak 1992: 20-21).

**To explore the research question, first,** the research methods are introduced. Next, the theoretical perspectives on immigrant communities, social networks and bounded solidarity are discussed. This is followed by a presentation of excerpts of the findings on themes evolving from data-analysis, highlighting the Long Beach experiences and comparing them to the Lyon Cambodian community. Finally, salient issues are discussed, followed by a compact conclusion.

### 5.2 Methods

This research aims at bringing forward descriptions and qualitative assessments. The research was designed to compare Cambodian French and Cambodian American community members’ and leaders’ ‘narrativizations’ on the history, practice and benefits or barriers they perceive in their community organizations. In contrast to personal narratives such as life stories, a narrativization focuses on particular ‘selected’ experiences considered pivotal by the narrator in semi-structured interviews (Atkinson 1998, Kohler Riessman 1993).

The major aim of comparative research is to identify similarities and differences between social subjects and contribute to theory formation. To place multiple locations side by side in order to analyze their convergences and contrasts provides us with a number of insights, however, it is not meant to bring forward generalized structural and ideological differences between France, the United States and Cambodia. Rather, it is a comparison of two distinct localities in which Cambodian immigrant communities are set.

Personal perspectives are explored by analyzing experiences in their local contexts in Lyon, France and Long Beach (CA), USA. The adoption of a dual sited research design holds the benefits of a people-driven approach as well as the completeness of acknowledging national institutional structures. Because of this
comparative approach to the experiences of selected informants in France and the United States, the multisitedness results in a form of juxtaposition of phenomena that conventionally appear to be “worlds apart” (Marcus 1995: 100-102).

The countrywide Cambodian population in France (2000) is estimated at 63,300 (Nann 2007: 148). In 2010, fieldwork was conducted in the Lyon-region which holds about 14,000 people of Cambodian descent. This is one of the largest Cambodian French communities, after Paris and Marseille (Wijers 2011). The countrywide Cambodian population in the United States (2000) is estimated at 149,047 (US Census 2000). In 2011 fieldwork was conducted in ‘Cambodia Town’, the Long Beach Cambodian American community which holds about 30,000 people of Cambodian descent. The Long Beach community prides itself on being the largest Cambodian community outside of Cambodia.

Members and leaders of community organizations in Lyon, France and Long Beach (CA), USA were contacted systematically and asked to assist in the recruitment of other informants (“snowball sampling”: Goodman 1961). In four, three-months periods of fieldwork, the experiences of individual and key-informants are collected through semi-structured interviews. The study is based, among others, on information provided by 18 American and 14 French organizations related to the resettlement process and, or the Cambodian community. Interviews were supplemented with field notes taken during social events as well as information from personal, professional and documentary sources.

Data analysis involved, first, the broad analysis of interviews to determine main themes and establish a first version of the codebook. Next, the interviews were made subject to more detailed deductive and inductive coding in Atlas.ti, a software meant for handling qualitative data. Finally, in order to follow patterns that had been discovered in the process, fine coding and axial coding brought forward specific issues and experiences that are presented in this paper.

5.3 Immigrant communities

While some question even the assumption of unified ‘community’ and perceive it as an ambivalent source of attachments (Hage 2005), the role of an immigrant community as a social network, a resource, is pivotal in this discussion. Problematizing the concept, over the years, the academic debate has developed an ever more mixed perspective on the emancipatory benefits of immigrant enclaves and refugee communities. These convergent perspectives are proposed as competing hypotheses for the comparison to follow.

On the one hand, the formation of immigrant communities is understood as a consequence of (in)formal processes of exclusion, marginalization and discrimination by mainstream society. Adding to this, theories propose that the availability of benefits and services, will ultimately hinder the formation of cohesive immigrant communities as they enforce existing divisions. In this view, heterogeneity best characterizes immigrant communities. The social networks that make an immigrant community may facilitate cultural self-isolation and social maladjustment. Differences within the group are often underestimated. Lack of access to resources may restrict social exchange and social cohesion (Menjívar 2000: 234). Focusing policy on immigrant communities may actually lead to high levels of mutual suspicion and divisiveness based on background factors like ideology, religion and class. In this way, social networks may even function as a restraint to economic progress and a catalyst for social inequality (Gold 1992: 19).
On the other hand, approaches to immigrant community are ruled by the idea of homogeneity. A desire among minorities to reside in each other’s proximity to benefit from co-immigrant support and to maintain the culture of origin is widely acknowledged (Fennema 2004). American refugee and immigrant policy is founded in the idea of ‘multicultural nationalism’ that social adaptation is best facilitated by organizations in a strong cohesive immigrant community (Shain 1999). In this approach, being a refugee or an immigrant matters in its propensity to structure social activities, networks and political interests (Erdmans 1998: 13). Moreover, immigrant solidarity is assumed to be a necessary precondition for groups to claim resources with the American government (Hein 2006). Next to restrictive, originally, the social networks formed within an immigrant community were perceived of as an organized system of solidarity for the allocation of opportunities that are operated through the ‘social capital’ its members accrue from it.

5.4 Social Networks

The interdisciplinary resonance of social capital in the social sciences has led to a range of uses and interpretations that are not easily reconciled. Bourdieu is among the most prominent authors, defining social capital, among other capitals in his groundbreaking work, such as symbolic and cultural capital, as:

The sum of resources that accrue to an individual or a group by virtue of possessing a durable network of relationships of mutual acquaintance and recognition (Bourdieu & Wacquant 1992: 1992).

In this interpretation social capital is perceived of as a sum of relationships within a social network, an emotional and personal attribution that may bind individuals, groups and communities. Despite Bourdieu’s contention that, in the end, all capitals will be transformed into economic capital, his definition has influenced the description of social reality from an individual or group perspective. In contrast, the political scientist Robert Putnam proposes that social capital, rather, is an asset, a resource that may ‘belong’ to owners and organizations and may function to “improve the efficiency of society” (Putnam 1993: 167). In this article, I will build on both ideas and understand it as: “The ability of actors to secure benefits by virtue of membership in social networks or other social structures” (Portes 1998: 6).

This research enquires into the ways in which this understanding of bounded solidarity as a source of social capital can help explore social cohesion in Cambodian communities as resources for their members’ social adaptation (Portes 1995: 15). The notion of bounded solidarity seems to assume a critical level of cohesion in as well as the well-defined boundaries to immigrant communities. It seems rational that, in order to share their social capital, its members would need to perceive of their fellows as ‘one of us’ and award them with the needed resources. Portes interprets this as a benefit and notes that bounded solidarity is observed among co-immigrants, that its motivations are “altruistic” and results in “transferring resources to others because of identification with in-group needs and goals” (Portes 1995:15). However, restrictive effects of social networks in small communities have also been reported. For instance, pertaining to migrant communities, Portes (1998) proposes that social networks are too often perceived as the source of public ‘good’ while they can also be the source of public ‘bad’ (Portes 1998: 19). The research presented in this article will build on these propositions and inquire into both the benefits and barriers that social networks have had to offer in these two Cambodian communities.
Nevertheless, research has documented the limitations of immigrant ties as resources for social capital in poorer communities (Menjivar 2000).

5.5 Refugee resettlement infrastructure

5.5.1 Long Beach (CA), USA

Cambodia town on Anaheim street in Long Beach, California, is a vibrant example of the Cambodian refugees’ achievements in building their immigrant community. However, while Khmer pride has given rise to an ‘immigrant hub’ with international prominence, its members also show many signs of “maladaptation” when it comes to economic self-sufficiency (McGinnis 2006). Dependency on welfare and relative poverty are repetitive hallmarks of the census data on Cambodian Americans’ economic progress. Health problems, limited language proficiency, gang related violence and high divorce rates are revealed in research on their well-being, painting the picture of a marginalized community that is not (yet) living up to the American dream (Marshall, Berthold, Schell, Elliot and Hambarsoomians 2006).

To explore the backgrounds to this state of affairs, first, the resettlement infrastructure navigated by Cambodian refugees in the United States is described and illustrated with excerpts from the Long Beach interviews. This overview of findings provides the main input for a limited comparison to the French resettlement infrastructure as experienced by Lyonnese informants.

In 1975 Cambodian refugees were awarded official refugee status. Cambodian refugees arriving before 1980, generally, were being allowed in on the basis of existing relationships to American organizations or the US government. Few formal regulations or legal procedures on refugee reception existed at this time (Horowitz and Noiriel 1992). The admission of Southeast Asian refugees (the Vietnamese, Laotians and Cambodians) was established with special permission from the President and Congress, using their parole power. In fact, the refugees arriving before 1980 were ‘parolees’. As a milestone act in American refugee policy, all Southeast Asian refugees were given immediate resident-alien status as they were fleeing communist regimes (Committee on the Judiciary House of Representatives 1975). This decision, however, did not receive much public approval:

Many US citizens became increasingly hostile to President Carter’s decision to admit a large number of Southeast Asian Refugees. Refugees were viewed everywhere as competitors for either jobs or social services (Vansin 1997: 11).

The parole program was part of the 1975 Indochina Migration and Refugee Assistance Act that enabled private voluntary organizations (‘volags’) to help resettle the new arrivals (Das 2007: 45). In comparison, an immigrant’s transition to being ‘American’ was supposed to find support with autonomous immigrant and religious organizations as it was considered a privatized process. In this case, the private process still takes the lead but was facilitated by the government in the assumption that:

It is only within a refugee’s own immigrant community that this kind of cross-cultural understanding and lasting long-range support can lead to successful social adjustment through meaningful, relevant and cost-effective services (Khoa and Bui 1985: 223-9).
The US Refugee Act of 1980 standardized refugee admission and, temporarily, allowed a much larger number of Southeast Asian refugees into the country. Very soon after, it became clear that centrally orchestrated official regulations were necessary to handle the large influx of Vietnamese, Laotians and Cambodians that needed to find shelter from the conflicts ruling their home-countries (Coleman 1990). The first Refugee acts were followed by a dedicated refugee policy of assistance that provided additional benefits and distinguished the facilitation of the social adaptation of refugees from the reception of migrants through the financial and technical support of Mutual Assistance Associations (MAAs).

The MAA Incentive Grant Initiative (1982) was designed to influence state policies and practices by providing them with an incentive to fund MAAs and thus strengthen the service capacity to refugees (Lewin and Associates 1986: 4). Within this system there was a lot of leverage for the State, the county and the MAA in negotiating tailored agreements. Freedom was the key, according to its governmental initiators:

> Freedom appears to be the key to refugees’ success and happiness in America. As long as refugees continue to feel the freedom of opportunity, they will continue to feel the freedom of opportunity, they will continue their progress towards becoming self-sufficient Americans (Committee on the Judiciary 1975: 98).

By funding the MAAs the government was starting to experiment with public-private partnerships in the service delivery of public goods. In many ways these associations were indeed a ‘business’ of service delivery that ‘profited’ from the efficient use of state grants. As Mr San, a former refugee and now a social worker, remembered his arrival in 1979:

> It was quite interesting because there were seven or eight agencies of resettlement and they had very different policies and ideologies. Some were Catholic, others Lutheran and even the Tolstoy foundation. Some only gave you a few dollars and kept the rest themselves, and others gave you all the money. They were like a business (Interview Long Beach, October 2011).

Next to the state grants, also, the US law allowed for Cambodian community organizations to be established as a ‘501(c) organization’. These ‘charitable’ organizations are allowed to hire professional, paid, staff and management employees as well as reinvest the money they make from their activities. Thus, as an American tax-exempt, nonprofit corporation or association can actually be run like a business and provide a living to its initiators.

> Certainly the Cambodians did not receive an easy reception in Long Beach. As a newspaper reported:

> The Cambodian presence (in Anaheim Street) has touched off a violent confrontation with the gangs of the well-established Hispanic Immigrant population and, in small but symbolic numbers, Cambodians are dying again in armed conflict (Mydans 1991).

The community organizations could form a buffer against the societal hostilities the Cambodians had to deal with: “As a buffer to racial problems, Cambodians formed social and cultural organizations to help one another” (Vansin 1997: 16). The most successful MAAs found a way to move beyond their original constituencies towards catering to other immigrant groups. For instance, they provided English language courses, support in
acquiring citizenship as well as legal assistance for people who did not have the resources to pay for themselves. Mr San, who was involved in the first resettlement processes said:

Refugees, a lot of them are not prepared for new circumstances. They had to move as they cannot survive in another place. I think the US government has done their best to assist these people. They really tried to invest in this (Interview Phnom Penh, November 2011).

During interviews, community members and leaders have expressed their appreciation for the infrastructure of policies and organizations set up to help resettlement. While government could never provide all the funding requested, at least they did invest in the refugees.

Between 1975 and 1980 some 500 MAAs were established by the Southeast Asian refugees in the US. The Vietnamese community, especially, was very “institutionally complete” in building encompassing social networks of businesses and immigrant activities. A completeness that the Lao and Cambodian communities could not compete with (Breton 1964). Ms Sophea, the former director of one of the biggest Long Beach MAAs explained:

At the start we were able to go up against the Vietnamese and beat them at their own game. Vietnamese always tried to control everything as far as the resettlement programs go. We needed to do something for our own people (Interview Phnom Penh, October 2011).

There was a sense of immigrant rivalry between these Southeast Asian groups that ‘jump-started’ the Cambodian initiatives for MAAs.

When the number of refugee applications went down in the mid-1980s, requirements for entry increased and the number of refugee admissions went down even more (Chan 2004: 69-71). In 1994 the Cambodian refugee settlement program came to an end. Over the following decades, due to the lack of diversity in funding sources and service provision to only a limited number of constituencies, some MAAs have had a hard time surviving as funded service providers. While different cohorts of resettled Cambodian refugees have aged and matured, needs do not seem to have changed much and many Cambodian communities are still considered “vulnerable” (Dermott et al. 2008, Marshall et al. 2006).

In summary, this section has described the ways in which the American government tried to establish special support structures for the resettling Cambodian refugees. Aimed at self-sufficiency, these community organizations were also public private partnerships that could be profitably run like businesses. Nevertheless, the Cambodian arrivals in Long Beach met with a negative public reception and little existing Cambodian community to fall back upon. Despite the support of resettlement infrastructure, ‘Cambodia Town’ is still not a model immigrant community.

5.5.2 Lyon, France

France has long denied the reality of being an immigrant country. This has resulted in notable inconsistencies between the ambitions of its immigrant policies and their practical effects (Noiriel 1988: 335). Even though it was the only European country encouraging permanent immigration in the first three decades after the World War II, in public discourse the labour migrations from southern Europe and North Africa have long been treated as a trend that would blow over. In this debate, as soon as industrialization in their homecountry and the state of
the French economy allows, these immigrants will just go back ‘home’ and French culture can remain undisturbed. Horowitz and Noiriel have labelled this as the “dichotomization of identity” meaning that:

Immigrants who are no longer ‘foreigners’ are presumed to exchange their former identity for a French identity. Hyphenation, the hardy perennial of American ethnic studies, is logically foreclosed in France (Horowitz and Noiriel 1992: 7).

In the 1980s, when the largest wave of Cambodian refugees arrived, French immigrant treatment is particularly contradictory in that it aims at complete acculturation and adjustment by refugees or migrants, while, at the same time, restricting their access to complete citizenship and excluding non-natives from government employment (Horowitz and Noiriel 1992: 11).

Just like the principle of secularism (*laïcité*), that determines the strict separation of state and religion, the French state also does not tolerate overt expressions of different cultural identities. In the 1980s and 1990s, when the Cambodians arrived, immigrants wanting to qualify for naturalization had to work on complete assimilation to be considered a French citizen (Nicholls 2007: 346-7, Noiriel 1998: 344-6). The principle of complete equality under law is understood as the rejection of any privilege based on origin by the state. Consequently, refugees are not registered on the basis of their ethnicity or culture of origin (Horowitz and Noiriel 1992: 69). The establishment of separate ethnic communities was blocked in every way possible. First, by the forced dispersal of resettling refugees over the country. Next, by the system of monitoring practices by social service organizations during the whole period of arrival and relocation (Simon-Barouh 1983: 10-15). Additionally, in order to start a community organization the Cambodians had to adhere to the ‘Loi de 1901’, a law established in 1901 that does not allow, according to jurisprudence, for non-governmental, charitable organizations to have any paid members and, thus, makes it almost impossible to professionally run a community organization of any size.ii

Affecting this study, Cambodian refugees are not registered individually but as belonging to the large group of Indochinese refugees that come in from the region in the 1970s and 1980s. The haphazard state of information in this period form an impediment to a more exhaustive description of the Cambodian French refugees’ process of social adaptation and their community organizations.

By signing the 1951 International Refugee Convention, France acknowledged the special situation of refugees. Accordingly, it made special provisions for the Indochinese refugees from the former colonies of Vietnam, Cambodia and neighbouring Laos who were fleeing the imposing communist regimes as of 1975. The Vietnamese being a dominant and relatively familiar group of Indochinese refugees to arrive, they have a large impact on the –relatively positive- French perception of the needs and capacities of the Indochinese refugees from the former colonies. The benign acceptance of the Southeast Asians, to the general public just ‘Asians’ or ‘Chinese’, incorporates also the reception of Cambodian refugees. As is in line with French immigrant policy, however, there is no acknowledgement of the hardship suffered under the Khmer Rouge and other communist regimes. For all Southeast Asian groups arriving the conditions for entry are determined by, either:

- their former involvement in French colonial government of French businesses;
- their French citizenship or their family-ties to French citizens;
their selection by French government in refugee camps based on special skills or qualifications (Mignot 1984: 89-92).

In combination with the colonial history shared by Cambodia and France and the relatively small number of Cambodian refugees admitted, this implies that, in general, the refugees allowed into France already have a certain degree of knowledge of French culture and language, as well as existing economic and social ties. Thus, rudimentary forms of human, cultural, social and economic capital may have been employed by all three waves of the Cambodian French to facilitate their survival in the new homeland (Simon 1981, Simon-Barouh 1981).

As of the violent Khmer takeover in 1975, the Cambodian refugees are officially considered refugees and facilitated by social services from the Service Social d’Aide aux Emigrants (SSAE) to find shelter in a refugee guesthouse (a foyer). In time, as refugees and not immigrants, they even had unrestricted access to French nationality. Education is considered the main instrument of their acculturation following the logic that ‘The Republic created schools, schools will create The Republic’ (Guillon 1988:122, Horowitz and Noiriel 1992: 149). Typically, Indochinese refugees to France are welcomed at the airport and will spend their first few weeks in a transit centre for medical examinations. They then find shelter in a foyer, for at least six months. Here, resources are made available to prepare the refugees for assimilation into French society. Governmental organizations coordinate and supervise training and education facilities and the refugees are supported by a governmental allowance. Finally, a welfare organization may make over and their permanent establishment in French society is realized.

In summary, the French resettlement infrastructure was focused on complete assimilation through education and integration leaving little room for the establishment of separate Cambodian communities, both under law and public opinion. While both societal reception and governmental resources were very supportive of the Cambodian refugees, also, their prior affinity with French society and the Cambodian communities already in place helped the resettlement process.

5.6 Cambodian Community

5.6.1 Long Beach (CA), the United States

Attempting to prevent societal tensions, American refugee resettlement policy focused on the dispersal of refugees over the country. The emergence of large geographically concentrated immigrant communities was avoided with some success in the initial stages of refugee resettlement by working with sponsorships all over the country. With the arrival of a limited number of first wave refugees, however, this was relatively simple.

The onset of the economic recession, in the early 1980s, coincided with the arrival of a third wave of refugees with different social backgrounds and a complete lack of resources. Ms Sophea, who has firm ties with both Cambodian French communities and many Cambodian American MAAs, shares her perspective on US policies of refugee acceptance:

People who did have family in the US got accepted there. In the 80s, the US just accepted everybody who could get out of the camps, people without relatives and without sponsors. So when comparing these people you will see the educated are all in France and the uneducated are all in the US (Interview Phnom Penh, September 2011).
Effectively, refugees with social connections to the United States were sponsored by family and members of the first wave and moved into existing Cambodian communities. Meanwhile, for the remaining majority, officially referred to as the ‘free cases’, the Volags contacted volunteers and organizations that could act as resettlement sponsors (Chabot 1991). They were forced to move wherever these sponsors could be found and, at first, spread out over the country no matter if there were jobs or not. Sponsorship is a characteristic of the American resettlement policies that was defined in official documents as:

An individual, group, or organization willing to take responsibility for the refugees’ housing, clothing and other expenses until they could become self-supporting (Wright 1981: 169-170).

After 1980, when many of these ‘free cases’ arrived, the resettlement situation grew beyond government control. In processes of secondary migration Cambodian communities that could provide work, support and agreeable living conditions received a large influx of new members. The Long Beach community grew significantly at this time. Its members attracted others in their Cambodian networks with little social perspective at other locations to join them in California. In 1980, thousands of Cambodian refugees started to arrive in California in primary or secondary resettlement. By the mid-1980s at least 35,000 Cambodian refugees lived in Long Beach. This led to a larger community that did not necessarily have access to more resources or formed a more cohesive whole. Mr So, a teacher of Cambodian culture at a local High School observed that:

Many people that came here, they had no education. Many of them were from Khmer Rouge families. But they did not reveal themselves. People knew that others were hiding their identity. There’s a big difference between the elite and these poor Khmer families’ (Interview Long Beach, February 2011).

MAAs were needed to help and give these newcomers a voice in local and national politics as they were often neglected as the ‘minority of minorities’.

The resettlement strategy of refugees in the United States was characterized by direct immersion in society without temporary arrangements to stay in refugee centres (Refugee Service Center 1981). Refugees had a right to government welfare and were enabled to access the Social Security welfare-Medicaid system (Wright 1981: 157-162). These policies, however, envisioned much more assertive action than could be expected from the Cambodian refugees at the time. The approach chosen was evidently based on prior experiences with immigrants, who held different motivations and higher levels of education than these Cambodian refugees (Chimni 2009). Illustrative is this detached observation made in a Refugee Development Program (RDP):

It is estimated by education officials that it takes the first seven week to even get the Cambodians to understand the use of a textbook (Shaw 1989: 30).

Of these groups of Cambodian refugees only 20 per cent were estimated to have some proficiency in English. Again and again, in interviews and literature, the underestimation by the American government of the level of disorientation and despair in this refugee group is revealed (Chan 2004, Das 2007).

Long Beach organizations had to deal with a wider variety of resettlement needs than most Cambodian communities due to processes of secondary and chain migration. When the official refugee reception budgets had long been depleted and official admissions were finished, the need for resources in the Long Beach
General Khieng, as a MAA founder and current member of its Board of Directors clarified:

“It’s very difficult. We can’t blame the refugees for their dependency. They came here and they were really stripped of everything. They had absolutely nothing. No education or money or even knowledge of the language. For the Vietnamese who were former educated people it was very different. They could bring their own possessions (Interview Long Beach, October 2011).

So, while the Refugee resettlement infrastructure was aimed at facilitating independence in the Long Beach Cambodian community, according to the Long Beach informants, its relative unsuitability for the quality and quantity of Cambodian refugees led to a plethora of problems. In fact, it seems that this evolving immigrant community grew into a vehicle for both the return of homeland conflicts as well its members’ dependency on the US system of resettlement aid to refugees.

The leadership question is a recurring theme in conversations about the Cambodian community in Long Beach. As Ms Sothy, personal assistant to a director at one of the MAAs said:

The leadership is very difficult. My former director did everything on his own and he did not know anything about financial accounting. We had debts too and we remained a small organization. We got stuck with a lease deal and all kinds of compiling problems (Interview Long Beach, February 2011).

Around the first elections in Cambodia under UNTAC the executive directors of both organizations, like many of the Long Beach community leaders, returned to Cambodia to join a political party. Interestingly, the success of some of the former community leaders in Cambodia was mentioned repeatedly during interviews while there were few stories of community members making a successful return to Cambodia. Mr Heng, a member of the local Chamber of Commerce observed:

Many of the members did go back. 60-80 per cent did go back to visit family. But I do not know of anybody going back for the long term. I did not see anyone successful. They come back broke. With a broken family but also with no money (Interview Long Beach, April 2011).

The internal divisions of the Long Beach community and the lack of leadership are often mentioned as an important reason for the relative helplessness of its community organizations.

Special positions within the community were reserved for many members of the first groups of Cambodian Americans. As a former General in the Cambodian army, General Khieng also summed up the advantages his peers profited from:

First, we came at the right time and the right age. But, we already got our degrees and education in Cambodia before the country fell, so then we could get education in the US also. Then we are very open. We are open to American culture. We can split our personality. Within our community we can adjust and in the American community we can be very vocal (Interview Phnom Penh, September 2011).

These members of the first wave of Cambodians in the US had come to the country before 1979 and had backgrounds in the military or as higher educated professionals belonging to the Cambodian middle class in Cambodia. Many of them had studied in the United Stated or had relations there that were familiar with American life, which made it easy to connect to the limited number of Cambodians already in the US and acting
as sponsors. After 1980, the support of these ‘socially adapted’ members of the first two waves of Cambodian arrivals in the US was essential in bringing the divided immigrant community together (Chan 2004: 137-141). Many members of this group earned community leadership.

Making the most of their relatively high level of education and the size and diversity of their social networks they profited from the opportunities the American resettlement infrastructure had to offer (Chan 2003). Many of the community leaders will refer to themselves as ‘entrepreneurs’ and have made a good livelihood out of their professional work for the community. However, their position also brought back the social divisions between waves of arriving refugees and ideas on homeland politics. In fact, the 1980s and 1990s witnessed a fierce competition between two Long Beach MAAs, that went far beyond professional rivalry and involved ideological beliefs and Cambodian politics.

The level of political activism is illustrated by the underground organization Seiha. Next to the initiation of a prominent MAA, the leaders also secretly founded Seiha, an underground military and revolutionary movement fighting the Khmer Rouge on the Thai/Cambodian border. General Khieng explained to me:

The MAA and the Khmer Veterans organization are social groups, but Seiha is political. We could not do political things with the other associations. We regrouped in Seiha and then we sent people to the border. At that time, after 1979 when we took a different name, the US did provide some funding for the Cambodian fighters on the border. Seiha did never stop. The Khmer Veterans, the MAA and Seiha are the same. The funding did go under the table (Interview Long Beach, November 2011).

Even after 1980, when the MAA received government funding to support its resettlement activities, Seiha remained active. As a result, government funding was indirectly used towards Cambodian revolutionary goals.

Moreover, indirect governmental consent seemed to stimulate political activism in the home land.

General Khieng continued:

My MAA got a lot of funding for resettlement. The US government did know about Seiha. They knew. They said: “As long as you do 8 hrs work, you can do politics on the side”. People from the State Dept. told us that (Interview Long Beach, October 2011).

Which demonstrates the ways in which government support stimulated both the homeland relations in this Cambodian community as well as the sense of exclusiveness within other groups of US immigrants. Rather than integration and assimilation, feelings of difference and cultural separation were awarded with funding and other benefits.

In summary, the large groups of resettling Cambodians entering Long Beach laid a large claim on its resources and community organizations. The level of self-sufficiency of these refugees was underestimated by the American government. Community leaders played a large role in the evolution of the community and the ways in which they brought back Cambodian politics into American life did not help feelings of solidarity. Political activism and immigrant competition were manifest in this community’s history.

5.6.2 Lyon, France

In Lyon, key informants for this research often hold considerable social status as professionals in the Cambodian French community. They had come to the country as migrants and exchange students before the Khmer Rouge takeover. Their literacy and language proficiency in French was adequate and they held a cultural awareness that
built on the former colonial ties with France. These first waves that used their existing access to France had the characteristics of migrants being of higher social background, more educated and more likely to be male than the refugees that followed (Moya 2005: 838). Moreover, they could build on an existing Cambodian French community supporting their process of social adaptation (Ebihara et al. 1994, Gilles 2004). A lot of the community members, as former civil servants, were able to experience a life similar to their prospects in Cambodia. Not only were many of the Cambodian diplomas and prior work experiences considered equal to the French, allowing, for instance, for civil servants to continue building their pensions. But also, even the larger waves of uneducated Cambodian refugees arriving after 1979 benefited from informal preferential treatment over other immigrant groups in the competition of unskilled labour with French industrial ‘giants’ such as the Renault and Peugeot car factories (Prak 1992: 20, Wijers 2011).

In contrast to Long Beach, religion is mentioned as the central gathering point for the whole community. The two main associations, which are at the centre of Cambodian social networks in Lyon are the two pagodas of St. Genis-Laval and Pusignan. They were founded the initiative of a group of ‘anciens’, first generation community leaders of the first wave of arrivals, and funded by voluntary contributions from community members. These religious organizations meet the requirements of the Act of 1901 and members do not receive any remuneration. A Theravada Buddhist monk, educated in Cambodia, lives above the pagoda and is responsible for all religious and moral guidance as an employee of the ‘pagoda committee’ (consisting mostly of ‘anciens’) that takes care of practical and financial affairs.

In addition to their religious goals, pagodas also have a role to play in political awareness, and the cultural and social development of their members. They organize meetings with national and international stakeholders in Cambodian political themes such as the introduction of a new political party or the latest verdicts in the Khmer Tribunal on former Khmer Rouge leaders. During the week, its volunteers provide care and support for older Cambodians in the region. Whether during major holidays or traditional ceremonies such as weddings and funerals, St. Genis Laval and Pusignan are undoubtedly the main axes of the Cambodian community life in Lyon.

This study confirms that social networks are formed according to the old structures in Cambodia. Family ties and religion still taking precedence and the associations that exist are grouped around the pagodas. The nature of the associations under 1901 law, non-profit associations, can be seen as an important factor in causing the short lifetime of associations. Foremost, the elders, ‘les anciens’. who have lived in France for longer and function as intermediaries are the ones who strengthen the community. They are seen as the guardians of culture and the ‘bosses’ that help in contacts with governmental, judicial and administrative organizations despite the generational differences and miscommunications that are frequently mentioned by my informants. Although one might think that the restoration of religious institutions must replicate the strict hierarchy, social inequality and patronage so familiar to traditional society in Cambodia, this is not the structure of Cambodian social networks today.

Undeniably, the social structure of Cambodian refugees resettled in France is firmly rooted in traditional Cambodian society in the way it replicates a division between social classes. However, the dynamics of globalization, individualisation and education in French society do not leave the traditional model intact. A diversity of groups, distinct in ages, professions and ethnic backgrounds, make up the Lyonnese Cambodian community. The influx of Cambodian students to Lyonnese universities have had their impact. Also,
international partnerships to implement humanitarian aid to Cambodia, discussions with visiting Cambodian politicians, trade relations based on the import and export of Cambodian and French products as well as the ambitions of a younger generation of Cambodians born and raised in France are driving these transformations. In Lyon, the local pagodas are always at the heart of these exchanges and operate as pumps that control this vital flow. It may be traditional, but Cambodian community Lyon is alive and united in all its diversity.

In summary, the Lyonnese community may be considered more traditional, religious and culturally focused than the Long Beach community. Its community leaders hold strong and established positions as community leaders and intermediaries to French society at large. As Cambodians have been familiar with French society for almost two centuries, there is a shared history that goes beyond resettlement and social adaptation. However, French immigrant policies and restrictions on separate immigrant organizations and communities have acted as barriers to the formation of professional Cambodian organizations to build a strong, exclusive Cambodian community in the ways it has been facilitated by the US government in Long Beach.

5.7 Discussion

From the accounts presented in this paper, first of all, it can be established that the government resettlement infrastructure and institutional structures have a determining effect on many of the immigrant communities actions. Law and policies can bind the form, aims and extent of community organizations and the support they offer, thus affecting refugees’ social adaptation process and sense of bounded solidarity. In Long Beach, for instance, like squeezing a hand full of sand, making the grains of sand fly to all sides, the governmental pressure may have encouraged community dispersal.

We often take for granted that community organizations set out with the ambition to help refugees and contribute to the survival of a refugee community. They may be the engines for communal initiatives, yet their nature is largely determined, also, by opportunity structures, politics and institutions. The material presented in this paper demonstrates that, additionally, issues that also played their part in the Cambodians’ taking collective action were:

- Governmental ideologies on resettlement;
- Competition between immigrant group;
- A groups historical ties to the host country;
- Policies on immigration and community formation;
- Transnational connections.

Remarkably, pre-and post-settlement as well as current Cambodian and American political affiliations are still influential in the choices for cooperation and community participation. Contributing to current discussions on migrant reception and policies this research emphasizes the tenacity of host- and homeland politics when society receives and treats a new group of immigrants as a ‘minority of minorities’.

Analysis of the interviews shows that, currently, (trans)national political affiliations are most mentioned in relation to the diversity in community organizations in the USA, while generational differences are referred to
by Cambodian French informants. While community members and leaders in Long Beach consistently mention politically related issues as major reasons for a lack of economic progress and the community’s vulnerability, in Lyon the issues that evolve from its diversity seem the reasons for mild misunderstandings and miscommunication. These findings could be argued to indicate that diversity does not have to be a constraint to a communities’ bounded solidarity. As in the case of Lyon, diversity may be exploited as a constructive factor, harbouring important sources of social capital in the multiple networks operated by each group that may be opened to the community as a whole.

In the United States, resettlement policies, local political expectations and MAAs strategy are all based on the Cambodian immigrant community acting in unity while, in fact, diversity, mutual suspicion and fragmentation characterize the Long Beach community. For instance, the Long Beach community leaders, as their counterparts in Lyon, often arrived as migrants and exchange students and did possess the resources and ambitions to invest in the Cambodian community. These well-connected individuals seemed to have no problem in rising to the occasion. Their social background and education had given them leverage to contribute to processes of social adaptation and take responsibility as political leaders in both homeland and host land. The diversity of their social networks, encompassing both immigrant, local and Cambodian contacts, provide them with abundant social capital to broker between contacts. In Long Beach, however, their political and business connections to Cambodia, however, still seem to arouse suspicions within the Cambodian American community and could be labelled as ‘negative social networks’ affecting trust relations.

While governments underestimate the diversity in immigrant communities, they are not necessarily a positive or negative force when it comes to bounded solidarity as a resource for social adaptation. Findings demonstrate that diversity may be reproduced both as a strength and a weaknesses depending on other external and internal factors at play.

This study shows us that the complexities of theorizing the social adaptation of refugees through community organization are many. Whereas theories predict contradicting results for refugees’ resettlement processes ordered by governmental infrastructure and immigrant communities, findings propose that none of these theories actually apply to individual subgroups in the divided Cambodian communities. The central message of this part of the research is that, as long as homogeneity, unity and a complete focus on host land politics are assumed in refugee resettlement policies, investments in processes of social adaptation will not fully contribute to the refugees’ social adaptation. Future theorizing on refugee communities will have to take account of the broader picture of homeland and host land politics as well as work on the understanding of the social adaptation of refugee populations in terms of networked relations.

1 The exempt purposes set forth in section 501(c)(3) are charitable, religious, educational, scientific, literary, testing for public safety, fostering national or international amateur sports competition, and preventing cruelty to children or animals. The term charitable is used in its generally accepted legal sense and includes relief of the poor, the distressed, or the underprivileged; advancement of religion; advancement of education or science; erecting or maintaining public buildings, monuments, or works; lessening the burdens of government; lessening neighborhood tensions; eliminating prejudice and discrimination; defending human and civil rights secured by law; and combating community deterioration and juvenile delinquency (website: www.irs.gov).
ii Association ‘Loi de 1901’- L’association est la convention par laquelle deux ou plusieurs personnes mettent en commun, d’une façon permanente, leurs connaissances ou leur activité dans un but autre que de partager des bénéfices. Elle est régie, quant à sa validité, par les principes généraux du droit applicable aux contrats et obligations’ (website: associations.gouv.fr)

(The association is an agreement by which two or more people share, on a permanent basis, their knowledge or activity for a purpose other than to share the profits. It is governed, as to its validity, by the general principles of law applicable to contracts and obligations)

iii The importance of the Seiha movement is contested and certainly merits further research. For instance, in contrast to the former initiators, in another interview it is described as:

Seiha was like, not an organization but really loosely organized as a movement. Just several people who got together. They started in August and Hul Nil was the big man. They became a group but not very well structured. They just used the name of that meeting to project a general image. I don’t think it was really organized as to mean anything (Interview Phnom Penh, September 2011).

iv In Long Beach interviews, religion was mentioned as of great importance to Cambodians, yet the local pagodas seemed a separate issue of conflict and are not neutral in their affiliations. Many small pagodas serve the Cambodians, producing fragmentation instead of unity. Many Cambodian Americans, also, have chosen other denominations.