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The Dunbars -- Alex, 7, Elizabeth, 15, and parents Hortense and Roy -- are British citizens living in Indianapolis. One British custom they savor is daily tea -- the beverage and a light meal. -- Karen Ducey / staff photo

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Faces of many places

Growing up in another culture has benefits and pitfalls -- and lessons for stay-at-homes.

By **Ellen Miller**
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January 19, 2003

If you've barely traveled beyond the Midwest, you might envy their well-stamped passports.

Corporations prize their chameleon-like ability to adapt to other countries.

They've been called prototypical 21st-century citizens. They're Third Culture Kids (or TCKs) -- people who've grown up in a country other than their parents'.

They may be the children of business executives, military personnel, missionaries or foreign service workers. They may hold an Australian passport but feel more at home in South America.

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Who are Third Culture Kids?

How many U.S. citizens are Third Culture Kids (sometimes called Trans-Culture Kids) -- raised in a land other than that of their citizenship?

There's no accurate count, but here are clues:

- Experts say that, at any given time, more than 500,000 American children are living overseas because of a parent's job.
- The State Department estimates that about 4.7 million U.S. citizens (including 925,000 American diplomats, military service members and other government workers and their families) lived

An exact count is hard to come by, but there are millions of TCKs, says Ruth Van Reken, 57, an Indianapolis resident who grew up in Africa as the child of missionaries. A book she co-wrote, "Third Culture Kids," explores the impact of growing up among worlds.

Van Reken recalls the grief and confusion she felt when she left Africa, the only home she really knew, to go "home" to Chicago.

"I lost my world at 13, but nobody had a funeral for it. I got on a plane to Chicago. I was an American, but . . ."

Her voice trails off as she describes the common TCK experience of discovering that "home" is really foreign territory.

"Where are you from?" is a hard question.

"I don't know any TCKs who like that question," says Lois Bushong, a Northwestside marriage and family therapist who grew up in Honduras, among other places, as the child of missionaries.

While many TCKs respond to their mobile childhoods by wanting to pull up stakes continually as adults, others choose to stay put with a vengeance.

Erin Baker, 25, is a commercial real estate agent who grew up in the Philippines and also lived in California and Singapore, but decided that Indianapolis would be home.

"If I lived in the same house for 50 years, I could be happy. I have been everywhere, and I don't want to go anywhere else," says Baker, whose mother grew up in Indianapolis.

Baker said her husband Brian's rootedness was a major attraction.

"He, to me, means stability," she said. "He's from here and always lived here, and that's what I was looking for."

She remembers rebelling as a teenager begging her missionary parents, Jeff and Donna Romack, to let her stay in Indianapolis with relatives to finish school at Lawrence Central.

"My senior year in high school was the best year in school I can ever remember having," Baker says. "Before, I was very shy and quiet and reserved. But here, I made the decision that no one knew me, and I didn't know anybody, and I could be anybody I wanted. They didn't know my life story."

TCKs can often surprise people who make assumptions about them based on accent, facial characteristics or skin color.

Alice Wong, for instance, may appear Chinese, and her parents are from China, but she'd never set foot in that country until her job at Eli Lilly and Co. took her there.

Wong, 41, manager of human resource development for Lilly, is a naturalized U.S. citizen.

Her parents met in Taiwan, where they fled in the 1940s after the Communist takeover of China. Her father's work took the family to

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outside the country in 2000.

- Brazil, with about 40,500 American expatriates in residence, ranked second only to Mexico, which had slightly more than 1 million, it said.

- In 2000, the census counted 1,968,486 foreign-born offspring of U.S. -citizen parents.

Sources: The U.S. Census Bureau, Barbara F. Schaetti of Transition Dynamics/Trillium Intercultural and The Washington Post

U.S. author learned 'Aussie'

You'd think a shared language would make a cross-cultural experience a snap. But not always.

When Ruth Van Reken, co-author of "Third Culture Kids," visited Australia in 1995, friends there lovingly created a minidictionary to help her with the varying terms for common things.

Some examples (Australian terms listed first):

- aluminium aluminum
- boot car trunk
- bonnet hood
- caravan trailer
- chips fries
- fringe bangs
- holidays vacation
- jam jelly
- lift elevator
- lorry truck
- mate friend
- rubber eraser
- rubbish bin garbage can
- scones biscuits
- tomato sauce ketchup
- "ta" "thank you"
- tap faucet
- tea supper
- thongs flipflops
- torch flashlight
- tracksuit sweatsuit
- verandah porch



Malaysia, where Wong was born and where she lived until she was 16. She also lived in Atlanta and Indonesia, and went to college in the United States.

"When people ask me where I am from, I don't know how to answer that," says Wong, who lives in Carmel.

She never quite fit in at local schools she attended. But at an international school in Indonesia, she felt the kind of connection TCKs frequently describe.

"All the kids there were from expatriate families -- for the oil business, cement business, embassies, etc.," Wong said. "I met all kinds of people from around the world. The teachers were from all around the world."

Before, "I'd always felt like I was the minority trying to fit in. But when I went to Indonesia, I got connected with everybody else in the same boat."

Her son, Alan, now 17, experienced that same TCK connection when they lived in China from early 1996 to mid-1999.

"He went to the American school in Shanghai," she said. "Everybody from the school was coming from a different place. Everybody had a story to tell about how they came to China."

Her tale surprised many in China.

"People would look at me and say, 'Isn't this your home?' I would say, 'Absolutely not.' It was as much of a culture shock to me as anyone. The only advantage is that I spoke a language, but I didn't speak or write the version that mainland China practices."

Still, living in the land of her ancestors was a moving experience, and Wong had some trouble returning to U.S. life when the Shanghai assignment ended.

Identity crises and transition challenges are common for TCKs. And Wong's son was not immune to the change.

"He was born and raised in Indianapolis. We would always have the debate, 'Are you Chinese or are you American?' He would always say, 'I'm American.' After we came back to the U.S., during the Olympics, when the Chinese were competing against the Americans in gymnastics, he was cheering for the Chinese."

London-born Hortense Dunbar, who has lived in Britain, North Carolina, Venezuela and Indianapolis with her Jamaican husband, Roy, has noticed that their British-citizen children vary in their sense of "Britishness."

Elizabeth, 15, seems to feel it more strongly than her brother, Alex, 7, says their mother.

"Elizabeth still sees herself as British. Alex, I'm not sure. He knows he was born in England. But he doesn't really have a loyalty to England. We went home for vacation, and he said, 'Why can't we go to Florida?' "

MOTHER SEES BENEFITS

Though it's common for parents of TCKs to feel some guilt over uprooting their children, Dunbar believes that her children will experience more benefits than drawbacks from their international experiences.

"This lifestyle gives them the opportunity to see the world in a way that is closed to most people their ages. Teachers have observed that

they are very good at making friends. They will bring in a child who is out of the fold. They've learned how to be a friend and how it feels to not fit in."

But experts in international mobility see drawbacks.

TCKs may be treated as showoffs simply for being honest.

"My mom tells me this great story from when I was about 5," says Erin Baker. "We were visiting Indiana, and we were in a department store. Someone asked me where we lived. I said, 'On a little island in the middle of the ocean.' The woman said, 'Sure you do,' like I was lying."

TCKs may struggle with divided loyalties, especially at a time of international tension, says Matt Neigh, a U.S. TCK who grew up in Austria and who works with Interact International, an organization that specializes in TCK issues.

"The question that's been coming up is, 'Why don't I feel as patriotic as everybody around me?' One of the challenges of being a world citizen is you realize that, as much as we wish there were no country or cultural boundaries, they still exist," he says, and TCKs may have to sort out their own boundaries.

As adults, TCKs may have trouble committing to a relationship, a job or a place. Bushong, the therapist, says she sometimes sees TCK clients whose spouses are tired of frequent moves.

TCKs may find that their experiences are polar opposites from those of their parents, who may have grown up in one place and who find travel exciting and may not understand why their child might need to sort out difficult feelings.

"I was at a conference once with my father, and we were being interviewed for a church panel," says Bushong. "They asked me, 'What was the highlight of being a TCK?' I said, 'Going to boarding school.' Then they asked my father, 'What's the hardest thing you ever did as a missionary?' He immediately said, 'Taking my kids to boarding school.'"

Bushong says TCKs may be more mature or better educated because of their experiences, but they may lag in emotional development.

"We don't start to figure out the meaning-of-life issues until later, because we are concerned with survival. Our biggest thing is trying to fit in," Bushong said.

CAN'T GO 'HOME' AGAIN

But TCKs visiting places where they once lived may feel new loss.

"I will spot a Honduran flag in someone's car in a heartbeat," Bushong said.

"Every time I see it, it brings a lump in my throat. I want to go back and see my mountains, my friends, to eat the really good food. But if you go back, you don't fit in, either. When I am in Honduras, I miss the States."

Despite the difficulties of a mobile international childhood, most say they are grateful for the way they grew up.

"I've experienced a lot that people twice my age have never experienced," says Erin Baker. "I don't think you can really appreciate how great the United States is until you leave it."

"People make fun of Americans -- that we don't know where countries are -- and that's horrible, but I'm sure there's some truth to it."

And I'm just so glad that that's not me."

Neigh predicts bright career prospects for TCKs as businesses expand global operations.

"You need people who are culturally sensitive, who realize there's a bigger world out there, and that no matter what their core political beliefs, people are human beings and need to be treated as such," he said.

Perhaps even the planet itself is no boundary for TCKs.

"I had to laugh when I heard about the woman who spent all that time on the Mir space station," Bushong said of U.S. astronaut Shannon Lucid. "They were saying how she would be the only American with the Russians. Then I found out she was a TCK.

"Her parents had lived in China for many years. And I thought, 'Leave it to a TCK to . . . go to space and live with another culture in close surroundings.' "

Call Star writer Ellen Miller at 1-317-444-6130.

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