

The Status of Khmer Women

by Elizabeth Chey

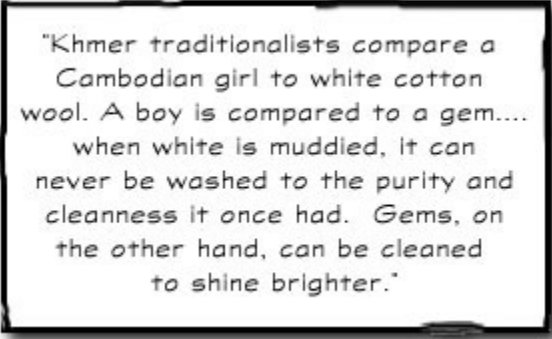
The image of the Cambodian woman has always been compared to the celestial goddesses on the walls of the great temples Angkor Wat. The pleasant smile and distant gaze serve as a paragon for Cambodian women. Apsara, as they are called, represent water and purity and the fluidity of the virtuous female.

Khmer literature, in its didactic tone, has also played a major role in shaping the image and persona of the Khmer woman. Through stories about Srey Kroup Leakhnak, the virtuous woman who upholds the family name, Khmer women and men are trained for their social roles within Cambodian society.

But after twenty years of war, genocide and suffering and now resettlement in America, both Khmer society and its people find it harder to live up to the old ideas of what they have always defined as Khmer.

With the redefining of social roles in the Khmer community, Cambodians face complicated challenges in adjusting to the mainstream culture of America. Faced with a 180 degree shift in gender roles, women have found it even more compromising to save their identities as Khmer women.

"To be an improper woman is to cease to be Khmer, and given Khmer notions of the centrality of Khmerness, to cease to be Khmer is to cease to be fully human," wrote Judy Ledgerwood, Ph.D.



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However, the conflict of ideals proves to have heavier consequences for women who have grown up in Cambodia and have now resettled in an environment which advocates and demands actions and morals that conflict with the social and moral systems they were taught to uphold.

Traditional Cambodian gender roles have relied on a unique system of "gender equality" which has been quite different from the "equality" considered by American standards from the women's feminist movement. As Ledgerwood explores, Khmer women's roles and their behavior greatly affect the status of their husbands, sons, and fathers. The ranking of a man within society has a direct correlation to the image projected by the women in his life. Women, have a power to upset the entire status structure through their behavior. It is a power that has no equal in male roles or in Western terms.

Yet this traditional role, though potent, has also proved enslaving to the Khmer women in the new Cambodian social structure and within the Cambodian communities in America.

As described in Khmer literature, the Khmer woman, must remain virtuous to uphold the image of her family. She is required to speak softly, walk lightly and be well-mannered at all times. She is required to stay in her home, and serve as the caretaker of the family and preserver of the home. As a young woman, a Khmer woman must be a virgin before she marries and be faithful to her husband after marriage, even though he is allowed to have extramarital affairs. But if a wife is

virtuous, he will not need to look elsewhere for happiness. She must be clever and wise by bringing greater wealth and status to her husband.

Heavy consequences exist for women who disobey the didactic message directed to them in Khmer literature. Often times the women are punished by rape or end their lives in suicide from shame.

Many Khmer women, especially single mothers, have suffered through tremendous hardships, which have greatly affected their self-image. During the reign of the Khmer Rouge, women were often viewed as being less threatening to the regime; their lives were spared while they faced the death of their husbands, sons and fathers. Many continue to carry their painful memories throughout their daily lives.

Darkness in Paradise

For many Cambodians, immigration to America was a trip to *thanh sour*, paradise. But for about 150 women in Long Beach, California, heaven's salvation wasn't as bright. The images of the war atrocities plagued their memories and because of severe post-traumatic stress many were diagnosed as functionally and legally blind.

Reports of their condition hit the media in the late 1980s, when several women, many of whom were on Medicaid, were going to optometrist to get their vision checked. Doctors discovered that although their eyesight appeared normal, their minds had willed themselves blind. After some further research, Dr. Gretchen Van Boemel of the Doheny Eye Institute in Los Angeles, tracked a consistent pattern of visual history.

Each one of the women had experienced and seen a family member murdered during the genocide. One woman saw her baby thrown against a tree. Another saw her husband disemboweled. Yet another witnessed the Khmer Rouge cutting the throat of her parents. And another saw her husband killed and was ordered not to cry.

"It's a coping mechanism," Van Boemel said to the St. Petersburg Times. "These women saw so much, they thought, 'I've seen as much as I can. I've seen bloodshed, I've buried enough babies, I've watched enough children die, and I don't want to see anymore.'"

As Chhou Chheng told the Los Angeles Times, "When I feel happy, my eyes are normal. When I think about Cambodia and my family, I see flashes of light and dark."

Although the women received adequate therapy from the researchers and doctors, they felt uncomfortable with American style therapy and diagnosis. People regarded as having any mental problems are considered deviants in Khmer society. Cambodians prefer to work out their problems within the family and with magic doctors or at the temples.

The psychosomatic result of post-traumatic depression that the women experience, are shared by many Cambodians. Although the traumatic stress may not be expressed in the same way, hundreds of Cambodian suffer from the memories of the atrocities and control their problems through suppression. Many of the women spoke of the reliance on Buddhist redemption and karma to cope with their suffering. They relate to problems with little resistance and reason that their condition was one willed by a predestined fortunate, their karma.

Widowed in America

Leng Houth, like other widows who survived the war without their husbands, hang pictures of their deceased husbands on a family shrine.

"I could not love anyone else as I loved my husband. It would be like a betrayal," said Houth as she looked at her husband's black and white photo taken nearly twenty-five years ago.

"I miss him everyday," she mumbled. "Tell my daughters about him as often as I can, so they will not forget how great a man he was."

Many of the women whose husbands were killed in the war, have remained celibate and choose not to remarry. Although many have re-established their lives within the American labor force and have learned to adapt to help their children, many remain silent and lonely.

Culture and literature play an important part in their choice not to remarry. Following the rules of being a proper wife, many of the women feel they must remain faithful to their husbands even after death. Once married, a woman is married for life and if she chooses to restart her life with another man, she is disrespected by her community and her peers.

Yet for others the story becomes even more complicated.

Vaing Sau and her three children had been separated from her husband, an air force major, Bantum Chim, at the start of the war. She and her children had walked through the streets of Phnom Penh to the labor camps and suffered through the trauma of Pol Pot's regime. She says she survived on the hope of being reunited with her husband. She fled to Saigon and managed to mail a letter to her husband, who had survived and made it to America.

Her husband responded with tears of joy and pain, but did not tell her that he had remarried after two years of being isolated and alone. When Vaing came to America, she saw a baby safety-seat in the car and regretted that she had ever come to America.

Chim arranged for her apartment, which was in the next building down from his and his new wife's. Confused and stuck between two women he loved, he didn't know what to do. The women, on the other hand, felt frustrated and betrayed.

Chim moved from apartment to apartment, sleeping at his first wife's apartment on nights when he and his second wife fought. But soon it all became a sham and he could not hold up the role of being husband to two wives.

"I come here to look for him," Vaing told the Washington Post. "I do what no women can do, with baby and children, walk and walk and we eat nothing. Many people die in my country. and I come here to look for husband. And he married!"

Legacies of the War and Camp Life

According to an article written by Chanthou Boua in 1993 and UNICEF surveys done in Cambodia in 1990, 65 percent of the population, and 70 percent of the able-bodied population are women. A 1990 U.S. Census Bureau reports that about 52 percent of the total Cambodian population in America are women. However, 13 percent of the median aged women are widows and about 25 percent of total Cambodian families are run by a female householder without a

husband present. About 5.6 percent of total families are considered mother-child subfamilies who live with relatives or other extended family.

The statistics reflect how the population was greatly altered by the genocide, but more importantly the change has created a major shakeup in the pattern of Khmer society. The visible changes within the gender roles began in the Thai-Khmer border camps as a result of relief policies and disproportionation of the sex-ratio.

In *Political Pawns*, Josephine Reynell, explores the dynamics of Khmer society in the refugee camps in the late 1980s. Under the "Women only" rule enforced by UNICEF, which tried to prevent rations from going to guerrilla soldiers, limited its distribution of rice to women and 8-years-old girls.

"Tickets entitling women and girls to receive food were handed out at the six-monthly headcounts when all eligible women had to gather within a fenced and guarded compound at an appointed time. These screening were traumatic for everyone involved, as families with insufficient food rations tried to pass ineligible children through the screening gates," Reynell wrote.

Great disadvantages were caused by the inequalities of the distribution. Families with more male adults and boys and females over age eight lacked sufficient rations of food. Also, families with small children were left hungry, with only the mother's ration to sustain the family.

Gradually, women's roles as the family breadwinner became a stronger and stronger force. For the first time, men relied on their wives to support the family with food. Khmer women's economic power had risen as a result of the relief policy.

In America, the same problem persists. Many of the refugee families became dependent on the welfare programs which aided families with smaller children. Welfare checks supported a family by proportion to the number of children under the age of 18. Women had more children to continue receiving checks and the role of the father as an economic asset was undermined by the government.

Another problem which has been a legacy of the overcrowded camp life and the psychological problems of post-traumatic stress has been the outbreak of domestic violence. With scarce resources and limited freedom, many Cambodians complained they were living like chickens in a cage. Psychological problems and disenchantment with the living conditions led husbands and wives to quarrels. Many men, frustrated with the dramatic gender role changes and lack of mobility, resorted to violence against their spouses.

Domestic violence prior to the war was very rare, but with the frustrations of war and disillusionment, the practice emerged while in the camps and continue for some Cambodian women now living in America. Substance abuse and gambling prove prominent in many of the urban city families and are greatly linked to the problems behind domestic violence.

While in camps, men also began to take second wives. Women, feeling inadequate about raising their families, had more to worry about if their husbands took a second wife. Polygamy was never unlawful prior to the war, but it was seldom practiced to the extent it was in the Thai camps.

In America, although polygamy habits have disappeared, higher divorce rates have occurred in the younger age groups. Many parents continue to arrange marriages for their daughters and many marry before finishing high school. Although some women have taken the opportunities to earn a higher education by entering college, traditional families still marry their daughters at around the age of 17 or 18.

Camp life presented many dangers to women, especially for women ages 15-25. The security problems at the camps and from trauma of the plight to the border allowed for many cases of rape and harassment. Because the number of reported rapes remained below the number of actual cases, a vast number of women have gone untreated and stigmatize themselves because of their experience.

A health study done in 1989 by Richard Mollica and Russell Jalbert, reported that 90 percent of the suicide attempts involved women ages 15-30. The report said:

"Most younger women have endured the suffering of the Pol Pot children groups and are now coming of age ill-prepared to deal with the responsibilities of marriage and child rearing. The increase in domestic violence and breakdown of the Khmer family structures (e.g. husbands having more than one wife) and lack of kinship support from older women and relatives increase their psychological vulnerability. Finally, many continue to be the victims of sexual and physical violence."

With a legacy of family shifting and violence, the image Khmer women perceive of themselves is a blemished image, a fractured Apsara.

Washing Muddied Cotton and Turning It Into Silk

Khmer traditionalists compare a Cambodian girl to white cotton wool. A boy is compared to a gem. And it is said that when white is muddied, it can never be washed to the purity and cleanness it once had. Gems, on the other hand, can be cleaned to shine brighter. Enslaved within a cultural double standard, Khmer women in America have been unfairly judged. The atrocities of war, the violence and the hardship have drenched the white cloth with a deep rouge. Blood is harder to wash than mud. The responsibilities they must take just to survive and make a living for their children ostracize them from the traditional definition of Khmer women.

To deviate from the definition, the image so entrenched in Khmer literature and culture, a woman ceases to be defined as Khmer. The backlash in response to resettlement in America has been an adamant urge to control younger Cambodian women from attaining a higher education, from entering the work force and from leaving the family home. Older Cambodian men complain of an increasing generation gap and say that younger people have lost their culture and no longer listen to their parents.



Bird seller, Phnom Penh.

What they do not realize is that the demands on the Khmer woman have changed dramatically. Traditionalists feel their own power has been undermined by the resettlement. The children, who have learned the language and have adapted to American lifestyles have become the family spokesperson in dealing with social worker or figures of authority or have become the delinquent, the gangsta out for retribution.

The Khmer family structure has altered for both genders, but because Khmer culture has invested so much in the preservation of their culture through women, the gender changes have been exceptionally astonishing for the community in search of its old identity. Like the smashed

sculptures along the walls of Angkor, the Khmer women's identity has been an intimate concern of all Cambodians. And the image's deterioration has direct consequences to each person's identity.

Unfortunately, the women, caught between the responsibility of fostering the Khmer identity for future generations and finding their place within the new power stratum, are blamed and blame themselves for the reshifting of gender roles.

Khmer women, eager to take advantages of the new freedoms and liberties and who are quickly elevating within the American system, have yet to gain the recognition of their communities. They find themselves alienated because they have lost the traditional traits of a Khmer women. They are regarded as a defector when they marry outside the race. They are considered antagonists if they voice their opinions within the community.

As for the widows and women who grew up in Cambodia, many have made compromises to adjust to their new lifestyles. However, many remain isolated within their homes and engulf their concerns in their children. They still perceive themselves as muddied cloth, marked by the blood of their husbands, sons and fathers.

The greatest misfortune is that few women realize the achievements and strengths which they possess. Having survived such atrocities and seeing all the bloodshed, they still have hope and a smile. It proves that Khmer women underestimate their own power and courage. Modesty, of course, is the sign of a "true" Khmer woman.

Gains Ahead

Women, in Cambodia and America, have emerged as a great economic power within their societies. Many younger women are realizing the task ahead of them. First, they must dissolve more gender barriers, so Cambodians can rebuild the country with a full force. Many of the younger women have sought education in the liberal arts: political science, humanities, economics and law. As of 1990, only four women attained a doctorate degree and all received their degrees after their arrival in America. However, the numbers are rising, and more and more women are shedding the old traditions and embarking on their career before raising a family.

With joint efforts by women in Cambodia and in America, the shock and tragedy of the war may be eased. The Khmer Rouge return to year zero destroyed the social, economic and political framework of Khmer life and traditions. After twenty years, Cambodia is emerging again and the women have brought a new face to the reconstruction.