

CAMBODIAN FAMILY: WHAT DOES IT MEAN?

Like many other Asian cultures, Cambodian people are highly family oriented. While most Asian cultures adopt the extended family system that consists of 2 or 3 generations residing in one household, the Cambodian family can be extended or nuclear. This is a contrast to some other Asian cultures. In Cambodia the nuclear family with relatives living nearby is the primary reference and basis for the household composition (Seanglim, 1991).

It is also said that the Cambodian people also adopt the extended family system that consists of 2 or 3 generations residing in one household. They are grandparents, parents, unmarried adult children such as aunts and uncles, children and the in-laws. The family bond is close-knit and involves lifelong rights and obligations (Seanglim, 1991). Everyone in the family is expected to live in harmony; they share food and look after each other's business to an extent that no one has any privacy at all. Deference is shown to older members of the family, including aunts and uncles of both parents, who play an important role in guiding and binding in family matters.

According to an interpretation, whoever has substantial financial means will have more control in the family matters. Some say that it is the mother who has more say in the family, she is the one who controls the family finance.

Wives who continue the attitude that husbands have the legitimate rights to make final decisions, tend to withdraw from spousal conflict to maintain harmony in the family. In Australia, a shift caused from the extended families to a nuclear family system because of acculturation. The spousal couple can make decisions; they no longer have the duty to seek advice and consent from parental families.

Gender issues

In the Cambodian family, men support the family and are decision makers. They are to be strong in times of crisis and carry out the heavy duty chores. While men are responsible for providing shelter and food for their family, women are expected to take charge of the family budget; women have to prepare meals whether they are employed outside the home. Women also do most housework until their children are old enough to help. Women are also expected to serve as the ethical and religious models for their children, especially their daughters. Husband is the head of the Khmer family and the wife also has considerable authority. This authority is exercised in family economics.

Expectations of and for children

In Cambodian society when children are young, parents look after them and when parents are old, children look after them. Because parents shelter well the children, the children are expected to listen, obey and honor parents. Children have to respect elders. They are taught to be polite, honest and obedient.

Strong Emphasis on education

In Cambodian society, parents push children to study to the highest level in education, especially parents who don't have the opportunity to study themselves. Intergenerational conflict occurs when the children acculturate with Australian norms.

Expectations of and for elders

Elders are respected by all age groups; they stay with the family for comfort and support. In many families elders are expected to prepare meals and take care of grandchildren while wife and husband work.

Expectations of adults in caring for elders and children

Traditionally adults assume full responsibility to care for a sick family member at home and sick elders are cared for at home as there is no so-called nursing home in Cambodia. In Australia Cambodian elderly want to live at home, no one wants to go to a nursing home unless circumstances make it necessary to place them in a nursing home. If an elderly is institutionalized, it is believed to be disrespectful to them; they feel abandoned by the family after years of caring for them.

FAMILY AND INDIVIDUALS UNDER THE KHMER ROUGE REGIME

The family structure has been destroyed by the Khmer rouge who introduced radical ideas about the structure of society. The foundations of the family unit were undermined by new social orders. The core functions of the family unit – economic interdependence, emotional support and loyalty were made to transfer systematically to the political organization. The Khmer Rouge carried out the extremist vision of a new society. Families were forced to separate by evacuation, the toll of casualties and the order of social policies. In some regions people were forced to move in with relatives in cramped conditions. In other regions, children under seven were taken from their parents and put in the care of strangers in the dormitory-like arrangements, the children were victims of the Khmer Rouge's effort to mold their thoughts and behaviors through the indoctrination of the new ideology (Seanglim, 1991).

During the Khmer Rouge period, there was little interaction between family members or married partners who were still together due to the demands of the labour and work quotas. Traveling and unauthorized communication about the welfare of other family members were not permitted. Youth were rewarded with authority and position, deference for the older people and their wisdom was no longer valid. The State even took over the role of parents by exercising their control over marriages, they arranged and approved marriages. Local officials approved marriages between individuals of compatible social classes and only such marriages could be authorized. According to Ponchaud, 1989 as quoted by Seanglim (1991), it was reported that State forced marriages between soldiers and disabled veterans to chosen women.

Communal forms of life style replaced family life. People had to prepare food for the commune and dine with the commune. Individuals need to turn in any food foraged by them to the commune as the requirement. Individuals were assessed on the tasks they performed, they were given food rations in accordance with the amount of work they did and the degree of productiveness they were perceived. This left the elderly, sick or weak, disabled with less share of food. Ebihara, 1987 as quoted by Seanglim, 1991 states that restrictions on family eating patterns undermined family confidence and solidarity and created distrust among family members.

Theravada Buddhism

Buddhism spans nearly 2000 years in Cambodia across kingdoms and empires.

Theravada Buddhism is the predominant religion in Cambodia that 90% of the population embrace (Mysliwiec, 1988). Theravada literally means “The Teaching of the Elders” or “The Ancient Teaching”. It was founded in India and is the oldest Buddhist school and for many centuries it has been the major religion in many Southeast Asian countries. It is believed that Theravada Buddhism has been the predominant religion in Cambodia since the 13th century. It recruited the disciples and monks from not only the elites and court but also from the villages and among peasants. This enhanced the popularity of Theravada Buddhism among the Khmer people; it was successful because of this inclusive and universal outreach.

Theravada Buddhism, is a non-prescriptive religion, and does not require belief in a supreme being but requires that each individual takes full responsibility for his own actions and omissions. It is based on three concepts: **dharma** or Buddhist doctrine; **karma**, the belief that an individual is responsible for their deeds and misdeeds and that their life will depend on their deeds, whether it is a rewarded life or a miserable life. The third concept is the **sangha** that is the ascetic community and it is believed that within the Sangha, an individual can improve his karma. Nirvana is the Buddhist salvation that may be attained when an individual achieves good karma by doing good deeds only. It is through existence that an individual, although lives and fulfills their duty as a human being and yet still manage to detach themselves from worldly matters. That is to say that they do not cling to one’s existence and yet still fulfill their duties as a human being. If they are able to achieve this detachment, they will be able to reach Nirvana. The Four Noble Truths are the fundamentals of the Buddhist doctrine:

- 1- Suffering exists
- 2- Desire is the cause of suffering.
- 3- Release of suffering can be achieved when desire stops
- 4- And enlightenment can be attained and consists of knowing the following truths that is the Noble Eightfold Path:

- 1- Right views
- 2- Right intention
- 3- Right speech
- 4- Right action

- 5- Right livelihood
- 6- Right effort
- 7- Right mindfulness
- 8- Right concentration

Although an average person can not hope for enlightenment or nirvana after the end of this life, they need to try to comply as best as they can with the moral rules of the doctrine. This is done so that they can improve their karma and their condition either in the presence or the next incarnation.

Role of Theravada Buddhism in Cambodian life

Buddhist monks play an important role in Cambodian life by transmitting the Khmer culture and values. Monks set a good example for the Buddhists to follow through their good behaviours. They act as educators to temple servants novices and newly ordained monks. It was said that monks were once the only literate people in the rural communities. Monks participate in ceremonies, marriages and funerals but do not lead. The monk's main role is to say prayers of blessing whereas the achar or master of ceremonies will lead the ceremonies. Traditionally monks were said to be healers or practitioners; their role was closest to that of modern psychiatrists.

Buddhism is still strong among the Cambodians living overseas, especially among the elderly. Most Cambodians believe in a supernatural world, they seek supernatural help when falling ill or in times of crisis. Traditionally Cambodians would enlist help from a practitioner whom they believe that s/he was able to obtain help from spirits. It is believed that spirits may be found in houses, Buddhist temples, along roads, in forests and a variety of objects. There are several types of spirits eg, ghosts, nasty demons and spirits of people who die violently, evil spirits, spirits residing in inanimate objects, guardians of the house, ancestral spirits etc. all spirits must be shown with respect. The living people can show respect for the spirits by providing food for the spirits, if food is not provided, misfortune may befall.