

**WOMEN IN CAMBODIA – ANALYSING THE ROLE AND INFLUENCE OF WOMEN
IN RURAL CAMBODIAN SOCIETY WITH A SPECIAL FOCUS ON FORMING
RELIGIOUS IDENTITY**

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ABSTRACT

This study analyses the role and influence of rural Khmer women on their families and society, focusing on their formation of religious identity.

Based on literature research, the role and influence of Khmer women is examined from the perspectives of history, the belief systems that shape Cambodian culture and thinking, and Cambodian social structure.

The findings show that although very few Cambodian women are in high leadership positions, they do have considerable influence, particularly within the household and extended family. Along the lines of their natural relationships they have many opportunities to influence the formation of religious identity, through sharing their lives and faith in words and deeds with the people around them.

A model based on Bible storying is proposed as a suitable strategy to strengthen the natural influence of rural Khmer women on forming religious identity and use it intentionally for the spreading of the gospel in Cambodia.

KEY WORDS

Women, Cambodia, rural Khmer, gender, social structure, family, religious formation, folk-Buddhism, evangelization.

Student number: **4899-167-8**

I declare that **WOMEN IN CAMBODIA – ANALYSING THE ROLE AND INFLUENCE OF WOMEN IN RURAL CAMBODIAN SOCIETY WITH A SPECIAL FOCUS ON FORMING RELIGIOUS IDENTITY** is my own work and that all the sources that I have used or quoted have been indicated and acknowledged by means of complete references.



SIGNATURE
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ABBREVIATIONS

ADB	Asian Development Bank
EFC	Evangelical Fellowship of Cambodia
CEDAW	Convention for the Elimination of all forms of Discrimination Against Women
CRN	Cambodia Research Network
DK	Democratic Kampuchea, as Cambodia was called during the Khmer Rouge Regime (1975-1979)
EATWOT	Ecumenical Association of Third World Theologians
FEBC	Far Eastern Broadcasting Corporation
JICA	Japan International Cooperation Agency
KEC	Khmer Evangelical church, the denomination of the churches founded by the Christian and Missionary Alliance.
LICADHO	Cambodian league for the Promotion and Defence of Human Rights
MoWA	Ministry of Women's Affairs
NGO	Non-governmental organisation
NIS	National Institute of Statistics (of the Ministry of Planning, Cambodia)
OMF	Overseas Missionary Fellowship, former CIM (China Inland Mission)
PRK	People's Republic of Kampuchea (1979-1989)
SIGI	Social Institutions and Gender Index
SOC	State of Cambodia (1989-1993)
UNIFEM	United Nations Development Fund for Women
UNTAC	United Nations Transitional Authority in Cambodia
U.W.	Ursula Wekemann

1. INTRODUCTION

1.1 *Background and aim of research*

I have been working in Cambodia with OMF since 2003, mainly in the area of community development in rural settings. Most recently, I have been working alongside a rural Cambodian church, mainly teaching the women. Over these years, I have met many Cambodian villagers and have gained some insight into their lives and struggles.

When working in community development, during my visits to our partner-villages and whilst attending training and meetings with them, I observed that often it is the women who participate in such meetings and other activities in the community. There are many examples where women are actively involved in community matters. They are also the ones wanting to find ways to improve their situation and actually work towards this. However, the official influential positions in Cambodia continue to be dominated by men, though there are efforts to encourage and empower women to take over leading positions, at least at village- and commune-level.

From my limited experience through the work with OMF, it seems to me that women have contradictory roles in Cambodian tradition. On the one hand, it would seem a woman is expected to be quiet and submissive to her husband, on the other hand she has to manage the household and family finances, is responsible for raising the children and has to advise her husband as well as serve him. She is expected to be 'soft' and 'sweet', but also to be a diplomatic businesswoman. This thinking seems to be still deeply rooted. Based on my experience, this seems especially true for rural areas, whereas in the cities, with Western influence and better opportunities for education, women seem more emancipated.

Often I came across the argument that a source of this thinking that women need be submissive is due to the *chbab srey*, a code of conduct for women, which shows how they are supposed to behave towards their husband and in the household. Even though people might not know the exact wording, its meaning has been passed on from generation to generation and up to the present time, still impacts people's thinking on gender roles. According to the *chbab srey*, a woman is always to conform to her husband's will and treat him nicely - no matter what he does. This is deeply rooted in

her thinking, and she seems to accept it as the proper way to behave, and it prevents her from realising her rights.

One day I went to a village with a group from the local Cambodian church. It was the first time that some new believers and other interested people in that village met to worship God and learn from His word. The majority of the people attending were women. Again, this is not an exception according to what I observed over the past years. Women make up a big part of the Cambodian church, and they often bring their children along when they go to church. This is where I see significant potential veiled. I assume that women do have considerable influence on the formation of religious identity, along the lines of their social relationships and especially in their families. If that is the case, it means that they play a central role in forming Christian identity, which could be used intentionally to reach people for Christ. There are many Cambodian Christian women who have been and are playing an important part in evangelizing Cambodian people by sharing their love for Christ with the people around them. I have gotten to know some of them. However, I have never heard of any attempt to strategically use the influence and the connections the women have for the evangelisation of Cambodia. My assumption is that being intentional about strengthening and strategically using the natural influence Cambodian women have on their social environment would be an effective tool for the spreading of the Gospel.

In many countries people can be reached by the Gospel through their children. Experience shows that this does not seem to work in Cambodian culture. It is easy to attract children and even share Bible stories to large crowds of children. However, many parents will quickly stop their children from participating any further to protect them from increasing Christian influence. Only few families are reached with the Gospel through the children.

Cambodian women do have considerable influence in their families and in the community, though it is often rather low-profile. What does this influence look like? And more specifically: how do women influence the formation of religious identity

within their family and the community? This research project shall address these questions in order to design a mission strategy about how their influence and agency could be used to reach the Khmer people with the Good News resulting in a multiplication of Jesus' disciples. My assumption is that forming religious identity through mothers might be a key factor for communicating the Gospel effectively.

1.2 Research question

Women have many roles and responsibilities in Cambodian society. However, their contribution is often taken for granted and not given much attention. This research shall investigate the role and influence of Cambodian women and find answers to the following questions:

What are the areas of influence of Cambodian women, in particular those in the countryside, on their families and social environment? And more specifically: what is their agency and influence on the formation of religious identity?

1.3 Research design and outline of the thesis

This thesis is based on the research of relevant literature related to the theme of study, which includes Cambodian history, belief systems and social studies. There are various studies related to gender and women in Cambodia, but gender in the Cambodian church has not so far been studied. According to my research, there is no publication yet about women in the Evangelical church in Cambodia, in particular those from the countryside who are ethnically Khmer. This research project addresses this gap, through a dialogue with anthropological and sociological sources. I will examine the role of women from different perspectives and analyse the influence they have on their social environment, with a special focus on their influence on the formation of religious identity. Based on the findings I will work out suggestions on how their influence can be strengthened and used intentionally to spread the gospel. Chapters two to four are based on a literature review whereas the implications and conclusions in chapters five and six are, in addition to the findings from the literature review, also influenced by and based on my personal

experience and observations made during my ministry and in interaction with Cambodian women.

The introduction clarifies the background and motivation for this study as well as the aim of the research and its limitations. It further includes an overview on the current state of research on the subject.

In the second chapter, I will provide a short overview on the different periods of Cambodian history, with special focus on the roles and areas of influence of women in the different periods.

In the third chapter I examine the different belief systems that are influencing Cambodian culture. These include the traditional belief systems, including ancestral and territorial spirits, Hinduism and Buddhism, and their practices and influence on social structures and daily life even to the present day. This chapter further incorporates an outline of the development of the evangelical Christian church in Cambodia.

In chapter four I look at the structure of Cambodian society from different angles, including a main section on family, the primary sphere of influence for a woman. I further describe the Cambodian education system, study the role of a *srey krup leakkh*, a virtuous woman as characterized in Cambodian folktales and finally, the *chbab srey*, the code of conduct for women, that has been dated to the nineteenth century, but still considered to have significant influence today.

In chapter five I first pull together the findings from the previous chapters to describe the context for the rural Khmer. On this basis, I discuss different ways how rural Khmer women can influence the formation of religious identity, including suggestion of how their influence might be strengthened in order to reach the Khmer with the Good News.

In chapter six I present a possible mission strategy and close with some final thoughts.

1.4 Limitations

This research focuses on women in the countryside, where about 80% of the population live (NIS 2011:8). It is my observation that traditional values still have strong formative influence in the rural areas, in contrast to the cities. A possible reason is that many

villagers have never been in contact with foreigners. However, in the cities, contact with people from other countries and cultures, in particular due to the presence of expatriates working in different organisations there, has had significant impact on behaviour and thinking, including perceptions about women. Nonetheless, it is the people who still hold to the traditional ways of behaviour and thinking that are the subject of this research.

Gender-based violence and sexual abuse, of women (and girls) is a big problem in Cambodia (LICADHO 2004:8; MoWA 2008:4-6). Many NGOs are working in this area and many publications have been written on the subject. In this research I will not expand on how this issue is addressed as it is not directly related to my subject.

In general, by 'church' I understand it to mean the body of Christ, consisting of all followers of Jesus Christ, and not a specific institution or denomination. There have been Catholic missionaries in Cambodia since the sixteenth century, when Gaspar da Cruz, a Portuguese Dominican, came to Cambodia in 1555 (Maher 2012:6). However, they did (and still do) not seem to have much influence on the Khmer as they had reached mainly the Vietnamese (Ellison 1991:5; Penfold 1980:17). The first evangelical missionaries arrived in 1923. (Ellison 1991:5) Today the majority of Cambodian Christians are evangelical and evangelical churches are growing quickly: from less than a thousand evangelical Christians that had survived the Khmer Rouge regime, their number has grown to an estimate of more than 260'000 (CRN 2007:30)¹ compared to about 21'000 Roman Catholics (according to a Catholic website²). My understanding of mission and evangelisation is from an evangelical perspective, so I will only focus on the evangelical church in my research.

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- 1 Newer data based on research by 'Mission Kampuchea 2021' (URL: <http://www.mk2021.org>) in 2012 only counted over 174'000 Christians in nearly 2'700 churches (URL: <https://harvest.globalrize.org/harvest/mapping/CP/map.html?db=Cambodia&displaylang=en&lang=sec> [accessed 30 Jan 2016]). This is an effective number and might not include all the small church groups, especially in the remote areas and those who are not registered.
 - 2 URL: <http://www.catholic-hierarchy.org/country/sckh1.html> [accessed 4 October 2014]. Newer data can be accessed through the link to the respective diocese.

2. HISTORICAL OVERVIEW

2.1 *General overview on the history of Cambodia*

The history of Cambodia can be divided into different eras, namely the Pre-Angkorian time (until the ninth century), the Angkorian empire (ninth to fourteenth century), Cambodia between the fourteenth and nineteenth century, the French protectorate (1863-1953), the independent state (1953–1975), Democratic Kampuchea, as Cambodia was called under the reign of the Khmer Rouge (1975-1979) and Cambodia after the Khmer Rouge. These eras will be examined in this chapter, with a focus on the role of women and how it changed over time.

Political history cannot be separated from social life and religious beliefs, they are all interconnected. This chapter will therefore include some social and religious aspects, in order to see them in their historical context. They will be examined more in-depth in the following chapters.

2.1.1 Pre-Angkorian time

The beginning of the recorded history of Cambodia dates back to the second and third century AD (Vickery 1986:4; Jacobsen 2008:17). It is not clear when Cambodia was first inhabited and by whom. Evidence of a pebble culture has been found in different sites in eastern Cambodia, which is “thought to date to as early as 600'000 years ago” (Mabbett & Chandler 1995:41). In the beginning of the recorded history there were “a multitude of chieftaincies or principalities dotted about what is now Cambodia, and beyond it into neighbouring countries (particularly Laos)” (:11), but there was no unified kingdom yet. Out of these different polities, Funan and Zhenla are the only two that are mentioned by most historians (Jacobsen 2008:17).

Where the early inhabitants of Cambodia came from is still a point of discussion among the scholars. Finds suggest that the people resembled today's Cambodians and also their language showed similarities to the modern-day Khmer language. “Languages belonging to the Mon-Khmer family are found widely scattered over mainland Southeast Asia as well as in some of the islands and in parts of India” (Chandler

1996a:9). It is undisputed that there has been a strong influence of Indian culture in Southeast Asia since the beginning of the Christian era, known as “Indianization” (Chandler 1996a:11-12; Golzio 2011:18). Elements of Indian culture have slowly infiltrated Cambodia over more than a thousand years. They were never imposed by force but have slowly been taken over. Around the third century AD a script was introduced that derived from a South Indian alphabet, one of the many ways Cambodian culture was influenced by India:

India provided Cambodia with a writing system, a pantheon, meters for poetry, a language (Sanskrit) to write it in, a vocabulary of social hierarchies (not the same as the caste system), Buddhism, the idea of universal kingship, and new ways of looking at politics, sociology, architecture, iconography, astronomy, and aesthetics. Without India, Angkor would never have been built; yet Angkor was never an Indian city, any more than medieval Paris was a Roman one (Chandler 1996a:12).

a) Funan

The earlier of the empires of the pre-Angkorian-period mentioned by most historians is Funan. Its extent covered the lower Mekong delta, including parts of modern-day Vietnam, Cambodia and Thailand and several ports along the coast of the Indochinese peninsula (Vickery 2003:136; Jacobsen 2008:17). However, it is disputed whether Funan can be called an empire. Golzio argues that it could rather be described as a federation for trade. The finds at Oc Eo, one of the major archaeological sites for this period, were excavated by Louis Malleret (1901-1970) in the forties of the twentieth century and provide evidence which indicates connections to China, India and even Europe. The size of the port Oc Eo suggests that in its period of prosperity it played a significant role in the trade between India and China (Golzio 2011:20-26). Later finds include not only many Buddha statues but also a number of Vishnu and Shiva statues which are evidence of the existence of Indian cults. An increasing number of Chinese reports on Funan since the fifth century demonstrate China's interest in it and confirms Funan's significance as trading power (:27). But the evidence also shows that “it is *a priori* unlikely that the several ports constituted a unified state, much less an 'empire'” (Vickery 2003:136).

The people of Funan seem to have many ethnic and cultural characteristics in common

“with the Cham and the inhabitants of the Malay Peninsula” (Jacobsen 2008:17). According to a creation myth of Funan, recorded by a Chinese diplomat, there was initially a sovereign, unmarried woman, Lie Ye, ruling the country and even leading the male soldiers into battle. But then Hundien, a man from India arrived at her territory, led by a dream. He dreamt “that a spirit gave him two bows, and ordered him to embark upon a merchant ship and take to the sea.” Liu Ye finally surrendered out of fear, when people got struck by his attacks, and Hundien married her (:19). Further evidence that female authority was widely accepted at that time, is the fact that “[g]oddesses in this period were represented separately from their male counterparts” (:20). The goddess Durga Mahishasuramardani ('slayer of the buffalo-demon'), for example, was very popular. There exist many sculptural images of her dating from that early period, which all represent her “standing triumphantly atop a buffalo head”. This cult, which had its origin in India, was very popular in Cambodia, even outshining its Indian counterpart. It also seemed to be common that women actively participated in religious ceremonies. “There are examples of buffalo sacrifices, performed by female religious officials, across mainland Southeast Asia” (:20). Jacobsen (:22) concludes that “[t]he fact that goddesses were represented as active, often aggressive, and separate from their male counterparts indicates that in early Cambodia, female authority in the supernatural realm was an acceptable concept”.

b) Zhenla

Inscriptions in Sanskrit and Khmer show that apart from Funan other small empires had been emerging at least since the sixth century, collectively referred to as Zhenla. Regarding the location of Zhenla, the inscriptions have been interpreted differently by the scholars. Some locating it north and south of the Dangrek mountains (Golzio 2011:36), southern Laos or even further north whereas Vickery (1994:16; cf :1-2) argues that it “was located entirely within the boundaries of modern Cambodia”. According to the Chinese theory, Zhenla conquered Funan in the second half of the sixth century, which was accepted by different scholars. But Vickery (1994:6)³ states that this position “is derived from very weak sources”. He points out that the economic

³ See his arguments in Vickery (1994:2-6).

and political decline of Funan, as shown in the records of the relations of China with early Southeast Asia, caused Funan to disappear without any outside interference.

As mentioned above, it is debated that Zhenla was a unified empire but it rather consisted of several different polities. Inscriptions indicate that Jayavarman I (ca. 657-685) “increased central authority throughout Cambodia”, and may even “have succeeded in creating a unified state comprising most of Cambodia within its present boundaries” (Vickery 1994:12; cf Golzio 2011:48). However, this unity has not been maintained after his death. He died without a male heir. Historians now largely accept that Jayadevi (ca. 685-720), the daughter of Jayavarman I, “succeeded her father, with a brief period in which the queen reigned in conjunction with her husband, the King Nrapaditya” (Jacobsen 2008:23). After the death of her husband, she continued ruling autonomously. This is not undisputed, it

differs from the usual treatment of the period after Jayavarman I, informed by the theories of George Cœdès and Lawrence Palmer Briggs, who believed that the death of Jayavarman I resulted in civil war. The implication was that a female sovereign was unacceptable to the people and they revolted against her (:24).

Jacobsen argues that the inscriptions do not support these theories (:25). According to Chinese records Zhenla was split into 'Land Zhenla' and 'Water Zhenla' in the early eighth century. Historians accepted this division as proof of internal power struggles, but this has been contradicted. Vickery (1994:15) points out that

[i]t was certainly not anarchy, fragmentation, and absence of rulers. In spite of the lack of inscriptions, and although we do not have the names of any of the rulers between Jayadevi in 713 and Jayavarman II in 770, except for the queens or princesses of Sambhupura [...], the steady investment in art and architecture proves the contrary.

Evidence of larger investments in temples also suggests that the situation of the country must have been sufficiently stable in the eighth century.

Looking at the status of women during these early periods, it seems that, although there are examples of marriage arrangements, which were clearly made for the benefit of the husband, the women didn't have a passive role, for “they were representatives of their families, who could be called upon to argue their families' interests, state their families' positions on policy, and act as intermediaries” (Jacobsen 2008:35). An inscription lists King Indraloka (early eighth century) as being “followed by his daughter,

granddaughter, and great granddaughter” (Vickery 1994:14), who are ranked variously as queens or princesses, while their husbands are not named. This does not mean that their spouses were not involved in ruling, it “merely reflects a structure of inheritance, and it is well known that in matrilineal systems the consorts of the heiresses may still hold political leadership roles“ (:14).

The position of women during this pre-Angkorean time can be summarized by Jacobsen (2008:37) as follows: “it appears that in the earliest periods of Cambodian history, women at all levels of society were seen as necessary and vital components, with important skills and abilities, and ideological significance”.

2.1.2 Angkor

With Angkor a new big empire arose, described by Chandler (1996a:29) as “the mightiest kingdom in Southeast Asia” that did “mark off Cambodia's period of greatness”. Scholars have usually dated it between 802 and 1431. However, the inscriptions do not allow attempts to define a clear beginning (Golzio 2011:63; Chandler 1996a:29). The empire was named after the city of Angkor, which became the capital in 889. The word has its origin in the Sanskrit word *nagara*, which means 'city'. There is not enough evidence to determine who founded Angkor. In 802 Jayavarman II, who was ruling in the area of northern Cambodia during that time “participated in a ritual whereby he became a 'universal monarch’” (Chandler 1996a:34). He is credited with reuniting Cambodia under one king. When he established his reign “the Chinese soon stopped referring to 'Land' and 'Water' Chenla, and reverted to 'Chenla', implying that for them the two parts were reunited” (Vickery 1994:16). Jayavarman II achieved that reunification through alliances with local rulers and “through marriages with women who symbolised the land in these places” (Jacobsen 2008:28, cf Chandler 1996a:35). However, the fact that “Jayavarman II and his son, Jayavarman III, left no inscriptions of their own” (Chandler 1996a:34), persuaded scholars not to recognise them as those who founded Angkor, even though the kings that followed honoured him as such (:36). Golzio supports this point of view and attributes the founding of Angkor to Indravarman, who came to rule in 877 and under whom a lot of construction activity

started to take place, as it was typical for the Angkor empire (Golzio 2011:65). Indravarman I was not a direct descendent of Jayavarman, as he “claimed his right to the throne through neither his position as nephew of Jayavarman II nor as cousin of Jayavarman III, but through his relationship to his mother and her sister - and even more significantly not in the latter's capacity as the wife of Jayavarman II” (Jacobsen 2008:30-31).

Art historian Philippe Stern described “a triadic pattern of royal behavior” (Chandler 1996a:37) that can be observed in the Angkor period. It was first noticeable in the reign of Indravarman and therefore caused Chandler to give importance to his rule. The three phases included firstly “irrigation works in honor of his subjects and the watery divinities of the soil.” Large reservoirs such as the one built by Indravarman not only served to collect the rainwater, but also had a religious aspect, as it demonstrated “the extent of a king's power, and of his alliances with the gods, by re-creating on earth geographical features associated in people's minds with the mythical homes of the gods, Mt. Meru, where lakes surround the central mountain” (:37).

Mount Meru is also represented at Bakong, one of the several temples that were built during the reign of Indravarman. The main tower on the highest platform, symbolising Mount Meru, is surrounded by eight brick-towers which might depict manifestations of Shiva (Golzio 2011:67).

Secondly this “triadic pattern” included honouring the ancestors by making statues of them, usually in the image of gods. And the last phase “was to erect a temple-mountain” (Chandler 1996a:38). The Bakong (mentioned above) “was dedicated to the king himself and was to serve, after his death, as his sarcophagus.” According to Coedes, Jayavarman II was the first of at least thirteen Angkoren kings to build temple-mountains. As representations of Mount Meru they were also the place where the gods and the “deceased worthies” lived. Chandler (:38) summarizes that “the temples were cities of and for the dead”.

Under Indravarman's son and successor, Yasovarman (889– ca. 910), there was even much more building activity than under his father. The capital of Angkor until the fourteenth century, Yasodharapura, is named after him. He also “brought the *devaraja* from Hariharalaya to this city” (Chandler 1996a:39). *Devaraja* comes from Sanskrit and

means 'king of the gods' or 'god-king'. This cult is already mentioned in connection with Jayavarman II (:34). Mabbett points out that “it must be recognized that the cult had to take its place within the universe of Khmer religious thought, as a patron spirit with protective power, like the *nak ta*”⁴ (Mabbett & Chandler 1995:90). He suggests that this might “serve for us as an important symbol of the Khmer sense of identity, but it is unlikely, that such success as Jayavarman achieved is to be attributed essentially to any declaration of his divinity” (:90). Yasovarman also had “monasteries built for sects that honored Siva, Vishnu, and the Buddha” (Chandler 1996a:39-40). This suggests that, though he was Shaivite, other belief systems were accepted, too, an attitude that can also be observed of later rulers. He further continued to honour his relatives from his mother's side (Jacobsen 2008:51-53). However, according to the inscriptions, there were no ruling queens. Unlike in the preclassical period, where women were represented as politically involved they were now described “as passive and dependent” (:42) upon their male relatives. “The inscriptions and epigraphy represent goddesses as inferior to their male counterparts”. This went along with “a growing emphasis on the value of physical beauty in the inscriptions” (:45). The female dependence also shows in the creation myth:

The Khmer creation myth, although similar to that of Funan and the Vo Canh inscription, differs significantly. The female protagonist, Mera, was described as 'most renowned of beautiful deities', but not as an active participant in events. The *maharishi* Kambu Svayambhuva arrived from 'Aryadesa' and encountered the Naga-king who 'owned' the land. Kambu was invited by the Naga-king to remain in the land due to their common veneration of the god Siva. Later, Kambu married Mera, who had been given 'as a daughter' to the Naga-king by Siva. After the marriage, Kambu ruled over the land, which came to be called after him (*Kambuja*, 'born of Kambu', evolving to *Kamboja*) (:46).

Marrying a woman entitled to inherit land as a means of ruling over that land, is known from the previous period. But, unlike Lui Ye, Mera was never in power and Kambu's marriage with her was rather a means to an end. However, Jacobsen points out that “the power of sovereignty resided in Mera, for Kambu was only able to rule the land *after* his marriage” (:47).

The extensive building activity continued under Yasovarman's successors in line with

4 More about the guardian spirits *nak ta* in the following chapter about belief systems.

the three phases described by Stern (see above). Among the most significant building works are *Angkor Wat* (early – mid twelfth century) and *Bayon* (late twelfth century).

Suryavarman I (1006-1050) expanded the Angkorean territory to the west as far as today's Lopburi in central Thailand. The irrigation system at Angkor was extended as well, which indicates that the population in the city had grown. Under his reign the administration became more urban in character and “priestly and bureaucratic functions, seldom separate in practice, were institutionalized” (Chandler 1996a:43). After a time of fragmentation at the end of the eleventh century, the Angkor empire was unified again under Suryavarman II (1112-1155). He was the first Angkorean king who built “diplomatic relations with China” (Chandler 1996a:49) and is generally known as the builder of *Angkor Wat*. But from the one who constructed this famous temple site only the posthumous name is known, which is Paramavisnuloka, meaning 'the one who went to the most high Vishnu'. Therefore he must have been Vishnuite. However, in his inscriptions Suryavarman II can be clearly recognised as Shaivite (Golzio 2011:100).

The climax of the power of Angkor was under Jayavarman VII (1181- ca. 1220). The victory over the Cham is attributed to him. Under his reign the kingdom reached the biggest expansion in the history of Cambodia. “By the beginning of the thirteenth century, in fact”, noted Chandler (1996a:61), “Angkor was extracting tribute from much of what is now Thailand and southern Laos as well as from Champa, occupying the coastal areas of central Vietnam”.

The fact that Jayavarman VII was Buddhist considerably shaped his reign. There is a “tension inherent in the words 'Buddha' and 'king'” (:59). The contradiction between these two different concepts is visible in his reign:

Using the Hinduized apparatus of kingship and the material grandeur associated with it, Jayavarman also sought in all humility – if his inscriptions are to be believed – to deliver himself and all his people from suffering. As a king, he had roads built throughout his kingdom, perhaps to accelerate his military response to uprisings or invasions; as a Buddhist, these roads were evidence of his beneficence. His program of public works, indeed, was probably more extensive than that of any other Cambodian king. The nationalization of kingship by a man who was arguably the most otherworldly of Cambodia's kings has given Jayavarman's reign a contradictory appearance (:59-60).

All the construction works under Jayavarman VII were carried out in haste and required the hard labour of hundreds of thousands of people. However, their “[s]uffering

to praise the Buddha by building Jayavarman's city, for example, assured the workers of less suffering and greater happiness – in another life” (:60). The *Bayon* formed the centre of the city of Angkor and of the whole kingdom. It symbolised the sacred world and was the dwelling place of the gods. In the central tower a big Buddha statue was found, sheltered under the hood of a Naga⁵. In contrast to the previous reigns Buddha now dominated over the Hindu gods (Golzio 2011:110).

Cambodian people converted to Theravada Buddhism in the thirteenth century, but what role Jayavarman VII played in connection with this conversion cannot be easily determined.⁶ There are not many datable inscriptions from this century, but historians agree that there must have been religious upheavals. Vandalism and defacements of Buddhist sculptures, in order to try to change them into Hindu images, indicate a revolt of the Shaivites against Jayavarman VII's Mahayana Buddhism. Also, regarding the political situation, the thirteenth century can be described as a time of crisis and rapid change throughout Southeast Asia, including population movements and invasions, which also affected the Angkor empire, as its control over the northwestern part of the empire (what is now Thailand) weakened (Chandler 1996a:69-70; Golzio 2011:116).

Concerning the situation of women during the Angkorean period, as outlined above, inscriptions and sculptures show them as more and more dependent on their male counterparts and not ruling autonomously any more. But Jacobsen (2008:49) argues that it cannot be concluded that this “meant a corresponding loss of significance for elite women”:

Yet women of the classical period continued to enjoy similar rights and roles to those they had in the preceding period, including property ownership, important positions at court, education, participation in economic and religious life, and a relaxed attitude towards female sexuality at the non-elite level. Most significantly, women continued to be perceived as human manifestations of their land (:42).

2.1.3 Cambodia between the fourteenth and nineteenth century

After Jayavarman VII's death around 1220, there are only few inscriptions and most

5 Naga (from sanskrit 'serpent'), in Hindu mythology, is a deity in form of a snake, typically a king cobra.

6 There are different factors that might have influenced that conversion. See Chandler (1996a:68-69) for more details.

evidence from that period is drawn from Chinese references. They show that there was active trade between Cambodia and China in the fourteenth century (Golzio 2011:127). Whereas many authors speak of the “decline” of Angkor because there were very few of the activities characteristic of Angkor “such as stone temple construction, inscriptions, and expanded irrigation works”, Chandler (1996a:78) calls it a “shift of emphasis” from “religious foundations and the ceremonial duties of brahmanical bureaucracy” towards interest in trade. He argues that Cambodia was still able to compete in trade because of its “enduring strength”.

In the fifteenth century the capital was moved from Angkor to Phnom Penh. It seems reasonable that this was “probably connected with the rapid expansion of Chinese maritime trade with Southeast Asia and particularly with the mainland, under the Mongols and the early Ming” (:77). Phnom Penh was a strategic location for trade at the confluence of the Mekong and the Tonle Sap. It enabled Cambodia to control the trade on the river with Laos and its vicinity to the sea was an advantage for overseas trading. Some traders from Malaysia, China and Vietnam started settling in Cambodia during that time and had increasing influence. In 1471 the Vijaya, the capital of Champa was conquered by the Vietnamese and the territory of the Cham was reduced to a small strip along the coast. This led to an increasing presence of the Vietnamese in Cambodia (Golzio 2011:129).

From the fourteenth until the nineteenth century Ayudhya kept invading Angkor and frequent wars continued in the west between Cambodia and Thailand (Chandler 1996a:81; Golzio 2011:127). In the beginning of the sixteenth century Chan, a Cambodian king, found temporary refuge in Ayudhya after he was deposed and was later restored under Thai patronage. This model was followed by many of the subsequent kings. Patronage relationships also developed with Vietnam, as shown in the following example: “A Cambodian king married a Vietnamese princess in the 1630s and, as a bride-price, allowed Vietnamese authorities to set up custom posts in the Mekong Delta, then inhabited largely by Khmer but beyond the reach of Cambodian administrative control” (Chandler 1996a:82).

During the following centuries more and more Vietnamese moved into this area, which is now known as *Kampuchea Krom* (= lower Cambodia) and belongs to Vietnam.

Having patrons on both sides, Vietnam and Thailand, Cambodia has been whipsawed by its two big neighbours.

Under King Chan (1530-1566) Lonvek became the new capital (Golzio 2011:130), but in 1594 it was conquered by the Thai (:134). Historians as well as Cambodian legends interpreted this as “a turning point” which was followed by “centuries of Cambodian weakness and Thai hegemony” (Chandler 1996a:85). By that time Cambodia had become involved in trade not only with Asian countries including China, Indonesia and Japan, but also with Arabia, Spain, Portugal, Holland and Great Britain (:86). Towards the end of the sixteenth and into the seventeenth century Cambodia was thriving as a trading nation (Golzio 2011:134). This confirms Chandlers point that it was a 'shift of emphasis' rather than a 'decline'. In the first half of the seventeenth century Cambodia became a “maritime kingdom” again, for the first time since Funan. But these international trading relationships also caused unrest, as people from different nationalities living in Phnom Penh got “involved in factionalism at the court and in plotting among themselves” (Chandler 1996a:88). In the second half of the seventeenth century trade declined because Cambodia's access to the sea was increasingly controlled by the Vietnamese and by Chinese merchants from South China who had fled the Qing dynasty (:88-89; Golzio 2011:143-144). Internal power struggles increased the weakness of Cambodia and further helped the Vietnamese expansion westwards into Cambodia. In the second half of the eighteenth century there was also growing pressure from Thailand (Golzio 2011:146). “Both Vietnam and Thailand”, as Golzio (:153, translation U.W.) puts it “considered the country to be their child and themselves as a constantly estranged parental couple that has to care for the protection of a weak, but disobedient offspring”⁷. They both tried to dominate its internal affairs. The Cambodian royal family was constantly divided into “pro-Thai and pro-Vietnamese factions” (Harris 2005:105), which weakened the state even more. By the nineteenth century Cambodia was isolated from the outside world by its two big neighbours. In addition to their invasions there were also internal rebellions.

The influence of the Thai was not only political in nature, but also cultural, as they

7 Original quote: “Sowohl Vietnam als auch Thailand betrachteten das Land als ihr Kind und sich selbst als ein ständig zerstrittenes Elternpaar, das sich um den Schutz eines schwachen, aber ungehorsamen Nachwuchses zu kümmern hatte” (Golzio 2011:153).

shared the same official religion (Theravada-Buddhisms), which influenced their values. Different *chbab*⁸ ('laws') originated from that period (Jacobsen 2008:75-78; Chandler 1996a:89-90), emphasizing the normative relationships, that were and are very important for any social interaction. “What kept society coherent, Cambodians thought, was the proper observance of relationships among people as well as the shared acceptance of Buddhist ideology” (Chandler 1996a:90). It was important to maintain class differences. While the elite relied on a patronage system for labour and military services, everybody had to “choose a noble as a patron and serve him as required” (Jacobsen 2008:132).

As reflected in the *chbab*, men and women “seem to have been perceived as spiritually equal” during this period (:79).

Elite women were active participants in political and social life of middle Cambodia, deciding matters of succession, acting as diplomats and confidantes, and orchestrating policy. They continued to own property and donate to religious establishments, despite the overly patriarchal timbre of the royal chronicles and didactic literature. Although, as occurred elsewhere in Southeast Asia, the court records imply that the involvement of women in the political realm had ill effects for the kingdom, careful reading of the sources reveals a continuing equality between women and men of the same social bracket in middle Cambodia (:94-95).

The egalitarian nature of the law in middle Cambodia allowed women to speak up against their husbands. When they were legitimately married, they were protected by the law and given status but not so when just living with a man. It seems that it was common for men to have several wives, as they distinguished three categories of wives: 'principal', 'middle' and 'lesser' wives⁹. All three categories were legitimate (:97). As it was the case in many parts of Southeast Asia and still is in Cambodia today, the women were in charge of managing the finances (:100). Women also seemed to know about and make use of their legal rights. Jacobsen (:136-137) gives several examples to illustrate this, including that of “a 15-year-old girl whose father had been murdered [who] travelled to the provincial court in Battambang in order to seek justice.” She would not accept a compensation and finally managed to get the murderer sentenced to death.

Because King Chan (1806-1835) didn't have any sons, his daughter Ang Mei

8 Khmer: ច្បាប់ translated as “rule(s), regulation(s), principle(s), code(s), model(s), permission”. The Khmer words used are translated according to the online English-Khmer dictionary by Chanbo Keo (2014), URL: <http://www.english-khmer.com>.

9 Khmer: *Prapuon thom*, *prapuon kandal* and *prapuon jerng* (ប្រពន្ធជំ, ប្រពន្ធកណ្តាល, ប្រពន្ធដើង).

succeeded him. She “reigned under Vietnamese supervision” (Chandler 1996b:102). Jacobsen (2008:115) suggests that she was therefore brought in causal connection with the Vietnamese occupation and “facilitated the identification of female political power with national humiliation.” However, the Vietnamese influence did not start with her reign, Chandler (1996a:124) had described her father as “[a]n early victim of Vietnamization”. There was no traditional Cambodian coronation ceremony when Ang Mei was enthroned, but it seemed that the Cambodians had accepted her as their queen, since she was able to grant titles and act in royal ceremonies.

The *chbab srey*, a code of conduct for women, which will be discussed in chapter 4, was also composed during that period. It implies that the woman is responsible to keep the good image of the family and submit to her husband regardless of what he does (Zimmermann 1994:26). According to the Khmer version published by the Buddhist Institute in 1962, it was composed in 1837, which would mean not long after the beginning of the reign of Ang Mei.

Looking at the role of women in the nineteenth century there is a big tension with Ang Mei reigning as an unmarried queen on the one hand and the *chbab srey* as well as the beginning of “a tradition of misogynist literature” (Jacobsen 2008:109) on the other hand. Jacobsen speaks of “a dichotomy from the perspective of women and power”. In practice, however, this anti-feminist attitude of certain people didn't seem to have much effect on the lives of elite women.

Whatever their husbands and fathers may have been reading (or writing) at the time, the available evidence shows no lessening in agency and resources for elite women in the nineteenth century. Even in the midst of civil war, the Cambodian queens and ladies of the court found time and money to establish *wats* and commission pieces of art and literature (:131).

Under the reign of King Norodom (1860-1904) the ladies of the court were granted special privileges. “Ladies of the court who were 'married out' to *okhna*¹⁰ were protected by law from ill-treatment by their husbands” (:132). Yet these privileges were reserved only for the elite women. The contrast between them and the lower classes was very big. Jacobsen (:144) points out that “there were more differences between women of different classes than between men and women within those classes”.

¹⁰ *Okhna* means 'official' and is also used as a title meaning 'Lord'.

2.1.4 The French protectorate

In order to escape the grip of the two big neighbours, King Duang sought protection from France in 1856. After the French had conquered the South of Vietnam, they started establishing the protectorate in Cambodia (Golzio 2011:160). When Duang died in 1860, the country ended up in civil war. Norodom, Duang's designated heir, fled to Bangkok as he was unable to rule and returned with Thai support. At that time there was a French missionary who was based near Udong, the capital in those days. He had already supported the “diplomatic mission” in 1856 and now urged Norodom to sign a treaty, in which the French would offer him protection “in exchange for timber and mineral exploration rights” (Chandler 1996a:141). Norodom finally signed, in 1863. For several months he kept it a secret from the Thai government. When they finally found out, he declared that he would remain dependent on Thailand for his whole life, but subsequently the influence of the Thai decreased. Cambodia remained a monarchy under the French, who tried to influence the country through the king. In 1866 the capital was moved back to Phnom Penh under pressure from the French, probably because of economic reasons, as it was more easily accessible from Saigon (Golzio 2011:160-161). Under the French protectorate the dynastic conflicts and rebellions continued, though the French managed to calm them down by 1867 (Chandler 1996a:141).

For the first two decades under French protection the administration was under young, energetic naval officers who were eager to explore the country. Among them were Ernest Doudart de Lagrée (1823-1868), Francis Garnier (1839-1873), Jean Moura (1827-1885) and Étienne Aymonier (1844-1929). They started the exploration of the Mekong, translated Cambodian chronicles into French and began to study Khmer inscriptions and write a Cambodian history. According to Golzio (2011:161) the uncovering of the history of Angkor helped in the longer term to raise the Cambodians' awareness of their past grandeur. Yet there was a big contrast between that splendour and the present “‘decay' of the Cambodian court and the 'helplessness' of the Cambodian people” (Chandler 1996a:142). In terms of the way the country was governed, however,

it seems that there was not much difference between the 1860s and the Angkorean empire; neither has that changed much since, even after the Khmer Rouge. To a certain extent many of these social structures, consisting of a network of officials and peasants, whereby the peasants had to support the officials with agricultural products or labour, still exist (:142; Golzio 2011:162).

A series of reforms began, aiming to restrict the king's involvement in land ownership, to reduce the number of *oknha* (officials), to abolish slavery and to reorganize tax collection, in order to protect the unprivileged, peasant population from being exploited by the elite (Golzio 2011:162-163). Despite Norodom's resistance he finally had to sign a treaty “to establish de jure French control” (Chandler 1996a:143), otherwise he would not have been able to stay on the throne. That document highly enraged the elite, because they feared losing their privileges as it included the placement of “French *résidents* in provincial cities, abolished 'slavery', and institutionalized the ownership of land” (:144). As a consequence the elite “were now to become paid civil servants of the French, administering rather than 'consuming' the people under their control.” The contract provoked a nationwide rebellion in 1885, which ended with a compromise in 1886 and the reforms could not be implemented. The French further increased their influence on Norodom by surrounding him with advisors that were loyal to them, who gradually took over more control. But it was only after Norodom's death that the French could implement their plans without hindrance.

When Norodom died in 1904 “the next three kings of the country were handpicked by the French” (:148). His half-brother Sisovath became his successor, instead of one of his sons, who were known to be very independent-minded. At that time the modernisation of the country started. Phnom Penh, once resembling a big village with wooden houses prone to flooding, became a city of French character, with a palace, official buildings, electricity, running water and better roads. The road system and a railway between Phnom Penh and Battambang were built, which marked a significant change, as people were now able to travel much easier (:160). A health system was established, meant to fight epidemics and to help the rural population which was most affected, but its main beneficiaries ended up being Chinese and Vietnamese immigrants (Golzio 2011:164).

The implications of the French reforms for the women were mostly unfavourable, as only few reforms aimed to improve the life of Cambodian women and those “contributed to their disempowerment by removing them from areas in which they had previously been significant” (Jacobsen 2008:148). One example is the reformation of midwifery. Midwives used to have a “special status in pre-colonial Cambodia”. They used to learn their skills from older midwives, there being no formal training. Therefore, as the French tried to institutionalise midwifery, women were removed “from positions of significance”. All midwives now needed a diploma from a school of midwifery that was recognised by the French, otherwise they “were prohibited from practising and persecuted” (160). However, this reform was not very successful as there was a “haphazard and overly bureaucratic” application procedure and the employment conditions were unfavourable. As a result it was increasingly difficult to recruit midwives and the policy, intended to improve the situation of women, was not successful (:162).

Improvements in infrastructure lacked in many points, most significantly concerning education. Only in 1933 was a former secondary school in Phnom Penh converted into a institution of higher education, the Lycée Sisowath. Before that, a few students had been educated in Saigon (Golzio 2011:167). It is therefore not surprising that the first newspaper in Khmer, the *Nagara Vatta*, appeared only in 1936 (Chandler 1996a:159). Together with the Lycée Sisowath and the *Institute Bouddhique* it became “a voice of a now awakening Cambodian national spirit”¹¹ (Golzio 2011:169, translation U.W.).

For girls, education posed an even bigger problem. Jacobsen (2008:165) notes that a “traditional' opposition towards educating daughters is often cited in studies of Cambodia”. Whereas it was considered important for boys to receive an education, girls “were not taught in the pagoda schools because their adult lives would be spent in the home, in the market, in child-rearing, in the fields, or engaged in cottage industries” (:167). Yet these typical female activities were regarded as “necessary and valuable” by the Cambodians. In October 1911 the French opened the first school for girls, “the *École des Filles* [...] under the name of *École Norodom*” (:165). Shortly after that other

11 Original quote: “zum Sprachrohr eines jetzt erwachenden kambodschanischen Nationalgefühls” (Golzio 2011:169).

schools for girls were opened by princesses. Apart from the ones in the capital of Phnom Penh, these schools were not very popular, though. An attempt was made to address the problem of secondary education for girls in the provinces when, in 1929, a circular was distributed to all provincial residents announcing the opening of “a boarding-house for Cambodian girls” in Phnom Penh (:167). It would have twenty places and would be primarily for girls who wanted to become midwives or teachers. The only other possibility then for Cambodian girls to proceed to secondary education was going to Vietnam, where “[t]he best schools in French Indochina were” (:168), but it was extremely difficult to get admission. As it was, Cambodians were already reluctant to send their girls to French-administered schools in Cambodia, so it is not surprising that they were even more so about sending them to another country. The schools at the pagoda remained much more popular, even though from the view of the French they “lacked practical curricula, formal examinations and trained teachers”. Also “Course materials varied considerably according to the wealth of the district. Most pagoda schools used the traditional codes of conduct, the *cbpap*, in order to instruct pupils” (:166).

An attempt of a French *résident*, Georges Gauttier, in 1943 to replace the Khmer alphabet with the roman one, could not be implemented. Like many others it was a reform that the French considered an improvement, but the Cambodians saw it “as an attack on the essential character of their civilisation, defined in part as what had been passed down from Angkorean times” (Chandler 1996a:170).

Although slavery had been officially abolished, bonded labour continued to exist (Golzio 2011:165). There were those people who had to keep serving for debts, as well as those who decided to stay with their masters (Chandler 1996a:145;147).

The French were also strongly against the high number of women whom King Norodom maintained at the palace, like his predecessors used to do. This had advantages for all the people involved, as it gave the women status and protection. However, as Jacobsen (2008:153) argues, the French did not understand all the reasons for this practice, including that the women “represented the extent of his support base, his masculinity, and his charisma, all of which were important requirements for kings”.

The French regarded it as

a barbaric form of institutionalised slavery. Although the French acknowledged that the people themselves usually offered their daughters to the king, they dismissed the practice as a superstition rather than an integral part of Cambodian political culture: '[Their] fathers are persuaded that their daughters offered to the king will bring to them and their families the favour of the spirits and protection'. There were other considerations, however, that led to the dissolution of the women of the palace (:154).

After King Norodom's death, the French took the opportunity to reform the running of the palace. The number of women at the palace was reduced significantly during the reign of King Sisowath Monivong and they “were of distinctly humbler backgrounds than their predecessors” (:159). As the king had less power, “[t]here was no longer any political merit in *oknha* seeking to establish an alliance with the king, as he was no longer in control of the bestowal of titles, honours and wealth”. After his death “all women of the palace below the third tier of wives were removed from the list of palace employees and their already meagre civil servants' salaries reduced to nothing” (:160). While the women at the palace had once been respected, they were now left with nothing. “In 1943 only eleven *kang chao*, very elderly women, remained at court; they had nowhere else to go and no provision had been made for them by the foreign presence that had condemned their once honourable role” (:160).

In 1907, after negotiations between France and Thailand, the Thai gave the provinces of Battambang and Siem Reap, which had been under their control since 1794, back to Cambodia. By that time the Angkor Wat had become a national symbol, which later also appeared on their flag (Golzio 2011:166). The restoration of the temples began, which was, according to Chandler (1996a:151), “probably France's most valuable legacy to Cambodia”.

During King Monivong's reign (1927-1941) Cambodians increasingly held government positions in the provinces, among them Lon Nol (1913-1985) and Prince Sisovath Sirik Matak (1914-1975), who would later become leading politicians (Golzio 2011:168). Yet the *Nagara Vatta* criticized, among other things, the Vietnamese overrepresentation in the Cambodian civil service and the Chinese domination of the economy (:169). There

was a new emerging Cambodian elite in Phnom Penh among the educated people. However, in the whole country there were very few Cambodians with tertiary education at that time (Chandler 1996a:164).

Most of the French activities were financed by taxes on crops, imports and export as well as by fees for services. The high taxes led to several protests among the peasants and tax delinquency was high. Chandler (:157) describes the case of Félix Louis Bardez, a *résident* who went himself to a village, who did not conform with paying the taxes and was beaten to death by the villagers, together with his interpreter and a militiaman who had accompanied him.

During the Second World War France was defeated by the Germans in 1940 and Thailand took advantage of this loss by claiming back the provinces west of the Mekong. This led to a military clash and the French being severely defeated in 1941. Japan interceded, because they were at war with China and had therefore a big interest in Southeast Asia, as it would provide them access to encircle China from the south, too. The beginning of 1941 saw a ceasefire between Thailand and France and concluded with a peace treaty where France had to return to Thailand parts of Laos, as well as the north-western Cambodian provinces Battambang, Siem Reap and Sisophon. Later that year, Japan occupied all of French Indochina, forcing France to make considerable concessions so they could at least keep their administration (Golzio 2011:170-171). They started liberalising some of their policies and practices intending to diffuse nationalist ideas, yet to no avail. Chandler (1996a:165) argues “that this liberalization, and several events associated with it, gave birth to elite Cambodian nationalism in the form it assumed until the 1970s”. After Monivong's death, his grandson Norodom Sihanouk became king in 1941. Still very young and without any training for his new role, he was dependent on his French advisors during the first years. Japanese troops posted in Cambodia limited his freedom of action even more. He was working closely with the French, in a relationship of dependency which received strong criticism from the nationalists, who became increasingly anti-colonial and pro-Japan, as they noticed Japan's supportive attitude towards some anti-colonial movements. The French administration was merely tolerated. Many of these Cambodian intellectuals were

members of the *shanga* and associated with the *Nagara Vatta* and the Institute Bouddhique, so this newspaper took an increasing anti-colonial and pro-Japanese position. In 1942, the Japanese sponsored a rally of nationalists against the French, also known as the monks' demonstration, but it failed and the leaders were arrested. During the next few years the nationalists were silent, fled or were imprisoned (Chandler 1996a:167-169; Golzio 2011:171).

On 9 March 1945, the Japanese unarmd all French military forces in Indochina and the French officials had to leave their positions. On the request of the Japanese, King Sihanouk announced the independence of Cambodia and changed its name from 'Cambodge' (French) to 'Kampuchea' (Khmer). The Khmer name originated from the Sanskrit 'Kambuja' (Golzio 2011:172; Chandler 1996a:170). In the following months several steps towards independence were taken, including the reinstatement of the Buddhist lunar calendar and the use of the Khmer language in government ministries instead of French. Nationalistic ideas could now be voiced publicly. The situation of the women had not changed much, though, because "the Cambodian nationalist movement, although advocating an active role for women, did not seek to empower them beyond the limits indicated by the *Cbpab Srei*" (Jacobsen 2008:172).

On 17 October 1945, Prince Sisovath Monireth became the new prime minister, but France under Charles de Gaulle was not willing to just give up their colonies in Southeast Asia (Golzio 2011:173-174). In the middle of 1946 it was decided that there should be general elections and three political parties were formed, all under the leadership of a prince, all loyal to the monarchy and all fearing the neighbouring countries. This act caused a lot of division among the Cambodian elite. The significant parties were the democratic party of Prince Sisovath Yuthevong (1913-1947) and the liberal party of Prince Norodom Norindeth (1906-1975). The resistance movement Khmer Issarak supported the democratic party, which was advocating a constitutional monarchy (:174). At the elections in September 1946 the democrats won fifty of the sixty-seven seats in the Consultative Assembly, a result not necessarily representing the opinion of the people, as Chandler (1996a:175) points out that "many peasants voted as they were told to vote by people whom they habitually obeyed". But the democrats were

not able to assume power for different reasons.¹²

In 1947 Thailand returned Battambang and Siem Reap to Cambodia. By 1948 there was increasing unrest in different Cambodian provinces about their political situation, which resulted in military resistance coordinated by the Vieth Minh. Three out of four of the Vieth Minh's leaders were members of the Indochina Communist party. There was an increasing polarisation between groups of the left-wing and the right-wing as the left-wing joined together in resistance against the French in Cambodia (Golzio 2011:176-177).

After the Indochina Communist party dissolved itself in March 1951, in September of the same year, the 'Khmer People's Revolutionary Party' (KPRP) was founded in Cambodia, which later became the communist party. About the same time a 'marxist circle' of Cambodian students was formed in Paris, among them men who were to become the leaders of the Khmer Rouge, like Khieu Samphan, Ieng Sary and Saloth Sar (later known as Pol Pot). After returning to Cambodia they joined the armed resistance, too (Golzio 2011:177; Chandler 1996a:181).

Opposition against France grew constantly and step by step Cambodia was released into independence. In October 1953 the king was granted “authority over Cambodia's armed forces, judiciary and foreign affairs” (Chandler 1996a:186), while economics still remained under French control. Finally, at the Geneva Conference in summer 1954, France had to accept Cambodia's full autonomy.

2.1.5 The independent state

As Sihanouk had gained much popularity over the years, he decided to abdicate the throne in March 1955 and designated “his father, Prince Suramarit, as the new king” (Chandler 1996a:188). He himself entered politics as a private person and founded the *Sangkum Reastr Niyum* (Popular Socialist Community). The movement grew quickly, though not all seemed to have joined out of free will. In the 1955 elections the Sangkum party won all the seats in the Assembly, but it is doubtful that everything went by the law (Chandler 1996a:189; Vickery 1986:13). According to Chandler (1996a:189) the following years “were characterized by Sihanouk's monopoly of political power and the

¹² See Chandler (1996a:175-177) for further details.

emergence of Cambodia onto the international stage”. Sihanouk's popularity continued and the kingdom prospered, although his ruling style was totalitarian and repressive (:190). It was not surprising that there were several plots at the end of the 1950s against the Sangkum government (Chandler 1996a:192; Golzio 2011:181). Sihanouk formed strategic alliances with China and North Vietnam, as well as received military and economic support from the US. Chandler (1996a:196) named the key elements of his policies as “his friendship with China, his search for as many foreign patrons as possible, and his secret alliance with North Vietnam”.

When King Suramarit, Sihanouk's father, died in 1960, his mother took the throne. She didn't have any political power but served “as a monarch for ceremonial purposes” (Chandler 1996a:193), whereas “Sihanouk had himself named Cambodia's chief of state”. That does not mean that she did not have any influence. She was nevertheless

described as highly significant in newly independent Cambodia: 'Today, Her Majesty Queen Kossamak who neither reigns nor governs, exercises considerable moral authority over all Khmers and sits well in the line of past queens, compassionate towards the poor and busies herself in fulfilling her duties with regard to the Nation and the people' (Jacobsen 2008:184).

Sihanouk propagated a “Buddhist socialism”, but a Buddhist ethic was hardly visible and the principle of nonviolence was not the only one that was often ignored (Golzio 2011:181; Chandler 1996a:199). The most significant improvements during the Sangkum period were made in the area of education; secular as well as Buddhist education were expanded. Among the teachers there were also many young nationalist radicals from the left wing, including Saloth Sar and his wife and Ieng Sary (Vickery 1986:15; Chandler 1996a:198). The Sangkum regime tolerated them as a result of Sihanouk's alliances with communist countries. These left-wing teachers did not talk about their connection with the communist party, but their students and many Buddhists liked them because their moral values expressed “a hatred of privilege, corruption and injustice” (Chandler 1996a:198). The education policies of the Sangkum government also aimed to improve school attendance and literacy for girls (Jacobsen 2008:187).

Opposition against Sihanouk's rule was not very strong nor well organised in the fifties

and sixties (Chandler 1996a:197). Sihanouk chose the people in government positions himself, but he also included some “leftist intellectuals, including Khieu Samphan” (Vickery 1986:16). In 1963, Sihanouk refused aid from the U.S. in order to stay out of the Vietnam war and to maintain good relationships with the communists. But he could not find another patron to replace the US. This had a major influence on the finances of the state (Chandler 1996:200-201). Reforms suggested by Khieu Samphan to address this problem, including luxury-taxes, were attacked from the right wing (Vickery 1986:16).

In 1963 Saloth Sar (Pol Pot) became the general secretary of the communists and the party changed the name from 'Khmer People's Revolutionary Party' to 'Communist Party of Kampuchea' (CPK). The party worked covertly, and when Lon Nol, the chief commander of the army proceeded against the left following a demonstration of students against the Sangkum, Saloth Sar and other members fled into the jungle for fear of being detained. They then travelled to Vietnam and China and stayed away until September 1966. When they returned to Cambodia they called themselves the Khmer Rouge and established their headquarters in in the north-eastern province of Ratanakiri, (Golzio 2011:185).

Towards the end of the 1960s, Sihanouk handed over more and more power to Lon Nol, who became prime minister after the 1966 elections, and to Sirik Matak, the vice prime minister (Chandler 1996a:202; Vickery 1986:18). Rebellion against the government increased. When in 1969 the United States forces started massive bombings against the Vietnamese communists in Cambodia, many young Cambodians in the eastern provinces joined the revolutionaries. Sihanouk was not willing to proceed with armed forces against the rebels which, according to Golzio (2011:187), eventually caused his rule to be overthrown. Attempts to force the North Vietnamese military forces out of the country with the support of troops from the United States and South Vietnam were not successful but caused a lot of devastation and many losses, mainly among civilians. Instead, the North Vietnamese troops expanded their presence in Cambodia to more provinces.

Towards the end of 1969, conservative officials started plotting against Sihanouk and in March 1970, he was replaced in a coup d'état. His cousin Prince Sirik Matak and Lon

Nol came to power while Sihanouk went into exile in Beijing (Golzio 2011:188; Chandler 1996a:203-205). The government of the *Khmer Republic*, as it was now called, continued to lose territory to the communists.

On 27 January 1973, the Paris peace agreement was signed by the governments of North Vietnam, South Vietnam and the United States as well as by the Provisional Revolutionary Government created by the Viet Cong, with the intent to end the Vietnam war and restore peace in Vietnam. As a result all foreign troops had to withdraw from Cambodia. After the signing of the Paris peace agreement the Khmer Rouge tried to extend their territory, causing more and more people to flee to the cities. Because of their rejection of the peace agreement the US army bombed the territory controlled by the Khmer Rouge, but often densely populated areas were affected as well (Golzio 2011:190-192). The number of people seeking refuge in the cities increased even more. The Khmer Rouge further extended their control until they took over Phnom Penh on 17 April, 1975.

Looking at the situation of women during this period, the government approved of women's participation in the political process. They could take part in the elections and according to the 1964 constitution, women “were entitled both to vote and to membership of the Popular Assemblies, and were equally eligible for office. Citizens of either sex were invited to take part in the National Congresses” (Jacobsen 2008:182-183). Yet it was different in practice. Jacobsen (:183) points out that the roles in which women were able to get involved were limited by constructs of gender roles and the idea that they should only focus on domestic concerns, which were rooted in the *Chbab Srei*, “and a confused sense that it was written by Ang Doung, hailed as the restorer of Cambodian culture and identity”. In the 1958 elections, Tong Siv Eng was the only woman who was elected to Parliament:

The first female member of the Cambodian parliament, she was Secretary of State for Labour and Social Action between 1958 and 1959, Minister of Social action from 1959 to 1961, and Minister of Health between 1963 and 1968. She and her husband, Pung Peng Cheng, were amongst Sihanouk's most trusted political advisors (:185).

However, a few other women were represented in government roles during that period: “three other women held senior political positions in the 1960s: Tip Man (1962-

1966), Diep Dinar (1966-1970), and Nou Neou (1966-1970). Towards the end of the Sangkum period, more women were entering into and promoted within the government” (:185).

Women were also recruited to both sides of the civil war in the 1960s and early 1970s and in that sense “achieved a greater level of equality than ever before” (:182). Many women, including girls, were recruited by the Communists and given some public power, as soldiers, but also in many other positions like cooks, medical staff, staff to spread anti-government propaganda, manufacturers, etc. Francois Ponchaud¹³ saw that “as a natural consequence of the equality between men and women in Cambodian society” (Jacobsen 2008:202). Jacobsen (:205) mentions the example of “Bun Rany, wife of current Prime Minister Hun Sen, [who] joined the *maquis* after the coup, opting for medical training. Five years later she was director of the Kroch Chhmar district hospital”.

The authority of Queen Kossomak is mentioned above as a positive example of female authority. However, there were also negative examples of women in the royal family. Prince Sihanouk “was represented even by the Khmer Republic has having been led astray by his favourite consort” (:200). Princess Monique and her mother Madame Pomme have been involved in very corrupt practices including selling government positions, which influenced how women were perceived: “Female power, therefore, became connected with corruption, social ills, and the loss of Cambodian sovereignty to 'hereditary enemies'” (:201).

Women were still guaranteed equal rights under the Khmer Republic, but there were fewer women to be found in high positions than during the Sangkum government. In official publications those women were mostly referred to by the name of their husbands, which, however, does not mean that their contribution was not important (:198). It was only that the theoretical improvements for women did not translate into practice:

The policies implemented by the Cambodian governments following independence should have enhanced women's access to power. Women were entitled to the same

¹³ Francois Ponchaud is a Catholic priest who first came to Cambodia in 1965 and is at present still serving in this country.

civil and legal status as men. Policies for increased literacy and education were implemented. Yet women were impeded from exercising greater social and political power due to deeply ingrained male attitudes and 'traditional' social constructs that maintained the idea that men were superior to women (:209).

2.1.6 Democratic Kampuchea

Cambodia under the communist regime of the Khmer Rouge from April 1975 until January 1979 was called Democratic Kampuchea (DK). In the days following 17 April 1975 when Phnom Penh fell to the Khmer Rouge, the cities were evacuated and everyone was forced to leave. All property was collectivized. In the following years people were forced to work hard in agricultural co-operatives. Food was scarce, families were torn apart as children and youth had to join and stay with their respective age groups. Thousands of people were executed, primarily those involved with the old government, but in fact it included everyone who was a potential opponent of the regime, like soldiers of the Khmer Republic, the police, officials, civil servants, teachers and other intellectuals or professionals, Buddhist monks who had not joined the revolution etc. Many others died from disease, malnutrition and overwork (Golzio 2011:193-195). An average estimate of nearly two million Cambodians died under the DK regime.

By the end of 1978 Vietnamese forces had mounted an offensive against the Khmer Rouge regime and on 7 January 1979 they occupied Phnom Penh. The Khmer Rouge fled into the jungle.

With reference to women during this period, they were treated equally, but, as Vickery (1986:57) states, “at a rigorous level which did not benefit women in any absolute sense”. Women were involved in different sectors like public works and agriculture, but also in military activities and could theoretically also get high positions. However, only a few women were found in senior leadership positions in Democratic Kampuchea and those were there “because of their relationship to politically powerful men” (Jacobsen 2008:231). Like the previous governments, Democratic Kampuchea “promised but did not deliver gender equality because there was no attempt to change the ingrained assumptions surrounding (male) political culture at the grassroots level” (:233). The

image of the roles of women remained the same:

Women continued to be associated with nurturing, domestic roles despite their activities in the fields and factories. Even though young children were removed from their mothers and placed in the care of the state, the cadres who replaced their parents were female. Similarly, in the areas where schools operated, teachers were women. So were nurses. When women occupied ministerial positions, they were associated with issues that were thought to be appropriate for women – such as Social Action, Education, and Culture (:231).

The sufferings of women under the Khmer Rouge regime were different compared to men, as menstrual problems, “miscarriage, and death in childbirth were widespread” (:218). The *Angkar*¹⁴ had very strict rules on how people had to behave. One rule said: “Do not behave inappropriately towards women”, which implied that no interaction with the opposite sex was allowed (:223). However, the practice of Khmer Rouge soldiers looked different and in punishments of women, for example, there was often “an element of sexual sadism” involved (:218).

2.1.7 Cambodia after the Khmer Rouge

People's Republic of Kampuchea (PRK: January 1979 – April 1989)

After the Vietnamese occupied Phnom Penh on 7 January 1979, a new government was formed under Heng Samrin as president and Chea Sim as vice president, which was from the beginning recognized by the Soviet Union (Golzio 2011:198; Vickery 1986:42-43). Among others, Hun Sen was also part of this new government, which originated in the people who had started fighting against the Khmer Rouge in the east of Cambodia. On 12 December 1978, the National Union Front for the Salvation of Kampuchea was formed in the 'liberated zone', probably near Snuol (Vickery 1986:42). Nearly all Cambodians had initially accepted the Vietnamese because their invasion indicated an end of the DK regime. During the first year most people were on the move, returning to their home villages, searching for relatives or seeking refuge abroad. A famine led to terrible conditions in 1979 because there was no rice harvest. Around 300'000 Cambodians left for the refugee camps along the Cambodian-Thai border at the beginning of the 1980s (Golzio 2011:200). Structures from before the DK were revived again, including “markets, Buddhism and family farming” (Chandler 1996a:229). In

14 '*Angkar*' (khmer: អង្គការ) is the Khmer word for 'organization', which was commonly used to talk about the DK regime. Orders, for example, came from 'the *angkar*'.

1981, a constitution was introduced, which was along the lines of the Vietnamese one and the state departments were restructured (Chandler 1996a:235; Vickery 1986:45).

Significantly more women than men had survived the holocaust of the Khmer Rouge. There were many widows and a lack of male manpower to do the hard work. Marriage was difficult because there were not enough men (Jacobsen 2008:239). The government responded by creating *krom samaki*,¹⁵ “‘co-operatives’ at village and commune level” (:240). Each *krom samaki* consisted of five to twenty families, in order “to ensure that each group has a comparable number of men, working animals and agricultural instruments” (Boua 1982:48). Each group was allocated an equal amount of land to cultivate and the crop was then divided among the members according to the amount of labour they contributed. One of the main purposes of these ‘co-operatives’ was to ensure “that those left destitute of ‘manpower’ and means of production – plough, oxen, carts, etc – can nevertheless participate in labour without having to sell themselves” (:48). Every group had to choose a leader and there were women in leadership roles, although this might have been a result of the high percentage of women who had survived compared to men.

Several anti-Vietnamese resistance factions emerged and in 1982, the DK, the royalists and the group under Son Sann (who had been prime minister from 1967 to 1968) formed the ‘Coalition Government of Democratic Kampuchea’ (CGDK) under the leadership of Prince Sihanouk, who had been living in exile in Beijing and was being pressured by China and others to go back into politics (Golzio 2011:200; Chandler 1996a:233-234). The PRK still managed to slowly form a functioning and responsive government under Vietnamese control, but a long period of civil war followed. The coalition forces were driven back into Thailand by the Vietnamese and PRK troops. After that, “a military stalemate prevailed” until the Vietnamese withdrew their troops in 1989 (Chandler 1996a:235).

When prime minister Chan Si died in 1984, Hun Sen, who still has a dominating role in Cambodian politics today, became his successor (Golzio 2011:200-201).

Regarding women's involvement, during this period there were more women in

15 Khmer: ក្រុមសហមង្គី solidarity groups; *samakki* means unity, solidarity, joint responsibility.

leadership roles at different levels, from municipality to commune, especially before 1985, when candidacy was not yet “based on central party nominations”; afterwards the number would decline again (Jacobsen 2008:244-245). Vickery (1986:57) points out that the higher number of women in responsible positions might “be no more than the inevitable result of the imbalance between the sexes after DK, when many more men than women lost their lives.” But a PRK slogan clearly shows “appreciation of women's contribution [...]: 'Her fingers move from morning until night [...] and the fact that their husbands become cadres is due to their wives' contributions to the cause of the nation” (Jacobsen 2008:241).

Women played a considerable part in the reconstruction of Cambodia after the Khmer Rouge, even though “[n]o women feature in the 'who's who' of post-revolutionary Cambodia as established by political scientists. Officially, there were no impediments to the empowerment of women in the PRK. Yet there were few women in high-profile roles” (:238).

The State of Cambodia (SOC: April 1989 – September 1993)

The PRK government was growing more self-sufficient. In April 1989 they revised the constitution and changed the name of the country to 'State of Cambodia' (SOC). They also introduced some reforms like

revising the national anthem, changing the flag, amending the constitution to make Buddhism Cambodia's state religion, and abolishing the statute that had limited monkhood to middle-aged Khmer. New laws also allowed farmers to pass title to land on to their children and householders elsewhere to buy and sell real estate. The death penalty was also abolished in response to criticism of Cambodia's human rights record (Chandler 1996a:236).

In September 1989 the Vietnamese troops withdrew from Cambodia. Following the reforms, a small elite started reemerging in Phnom Penh. However, in the countryside the situation was very bad. Chandler (:236) describes “a rural population that was poorer and more poorly served than at any time since the 1920s. The rate of infant mortality was one of the highest in the world; so was the birthrate. Malaria and other fevers were endemic; so was malnutrition”. There were many more problems like mental illnesses following all the years of war, and the lack or absence of infrastructure like schools, medical facilities and medicine, tools and electricity. The government had

hardly any funds as aid from communist powers was cut down due to the fall of communism in Eastern Europe. It was not able to cope with all these problems.

Efforts to settle the conflicts in Cambodia included a conference in Paris in 1989, where all four Cambodian parties were represented as well as representatives from eighteen countries¹⁶ and the Secretary-General of the United Nations, and a final conference in October 1991, which ended with the signing of the Paris Peace Accords. Thereupon the United Nations Transitional Authority in Cambodia (UNTAC) took over the governing of the country in the following 18 months together with representatives of the current government and the opposing factions, in order to prepare the way for democratic elections in 1993, which were UNTAC monitored, too. The multiparty system was re-established and the repatriation of the Khmer from the refugee camps along the Thai border was initiated (Golzio 2011:202-203). The Khmer Rouge remained active, refusing to disarm their troops and in fact expanded their territory in 1992 (Chandler 1996a:239). They boycotted the elections in July 1993, which were nevertheless peaceful. Funcinpec¹⁷ the party of Sihanouk's son Prince Norodom Ranaridh, won 58 seats, Hun Sen's Cambodian People's Party (CPP) 51 and a joint government was formed with Norodom Ranaridh as first and Hun Sen as second prime minister (Golzio 2011:203).

Constitutional monarchy (September 1993 until now)

On 21 September 1993 the new constitution was established and since then Cambodia has been a constitutional monarchy. Sihanouk was put on the throne again, but was given little power. He remained on the throne until he stepped down in 2004 and handed over to his son, Norodom Sihamoni, the present king. Prime minister Hun Sen later increased his power and is still leading the country. Armed conflicts between the different parties as well as attacks by the Khmer Rouge who had been pushed back to the North-West, continued until the mid 1990s (Golzio 2011:204-205). Starting in 2009 a tribunal was held to charge the five former leaders of the Khmer Rouge who were still

16 These countries included China, France, the United States, the United Kingdom, the Soviet Union and Cambodia's neighbours Vietnam, Laos and Thailand.

17 Funcinpec stands for 'Front Uni National pour un Cambodge Indépendant Neutre Pacifique Et Coopératif' (National United Front for an Independent, Neutral, Peaceful and Cooperative Cambodia).

alive at that time.

There were very few women standing for the elections in this period and apparently they were not encouraged to do so, as Jacobsen (2008:251) states:

“The official reasons, put forward by the Secretariat of State for Women's Affairs in 1995, that so few women ran in the May 1993 elections, were political harassment, lack of true democracy, and 'the lack of political will of the parties' leaders, who were predominantly men”.

Chantou Boua (1982:52) attributes the lack of Cambodian women within the government hierarchy to their “trained modesty among Khmer women which has its roots many centuries back [...], the widespread chauvinism of Khmer men” and the results of trauma suffered during the Khmer Rouge.

The implementation of the liberalisation policies had considerable consequences for women, as expenses increased and therefore the number of staff in the public sector had to be cut down. This affected women the most. The Women's Association stopped receiving further financial support (Jacobsen 2008:249-250). But at the same time more and more local non-governmental organisations (NGOs), which focus on women's issues, were established, advocating the protection of women's rights and raising awareness in order to improve the situation of women (:250; 276-277).

2.2 The changing role of women

Throughout the history of Cambodia, the findings presented in this chapter show that during the earliest period women had authority in society and that their leadership was accepted also by men. This changed during the Angkor period, when their role became more passive and dependent on their male counterparts. Not much more can be said as there is a lack of documentation on this matter, especially for the early periods. The available sources tend to talk about the elite and, to a certain extent, about those related to them like their servants and slaves (Jacobsen 2008:35). The peasant women, who made up most of the female population, are hardly mentioned or, in Jacobsen's words: “Little is known of the people who existed in the world between the elite and the enslaved”.

The nineteenth century when the different *chbab* and in particular the *chbab srey*

were composed, seemed to have a more formative influence on the role of women up to the present day, as in the subsequent periods the *chbab srey* played a significant part in the definition of the role of women. Its use in the schools over generations shaped the Khmer thinking about how women are expected to behave. Jacobsen repeatedly argues against a false construct that defines the view of the nineteenth century as 'traditional' and therefore normative for following generations:

The powerlessness and subservience taken to be 'traditional' for Cambodian women is based upon a false premise. Yet it is this role that has become identified as 'correct behaviour' in the minds of generations of Cambodians and which has constrained women from accessing a greater share of positions in public life. As modernisation began to impact upon Cambodian society in the 1950s and 1960s, women were charged with guardianship of the Cambodian past; any attempt to move beyond the parameters of a *srei krup leakkhana* was perceived as a threat to Cambodian culture (:285-286).¹⁸

Often there seems to be a gap between theory and practice regarding the role of women. Even though the law treated women as equal to men, there are, for example, much fewer women represented in leadership roles. However, according to the findings in this chapter there are examples of women in higher positions, even though few, but they show that it was not impossible. From my experience I agree with Jacobsen, that the *chbab srey* and the way it shaped Cambodian thinking about the role of women has contributed to and still contributes to the fact that, despite theoretical gender equality, practice looks different. Women seem to be stuck in their 'traditional' roles.

It seems crucial to me to clearly define what is meant by the 'power' or 'influence' of women. Throughout the different periods of Cambodian history, women made significant contributions, regardless of their access to high leadership roles. This is also reflected in Chandler's statement "that, while the female voice is for the most part absent in accepted versions of Cambodian history, this is not necessarily a reflection of the importance or passivity of women" (Jacobsen 2008:2). The influence and contributions of Cambodian women have hardly been in the spotlight, which might cause them to be unrecognised, but it does not make them less important.

Our values and culture define what is important for us, and this can be different for different people, and even more so for different cultures. Often those areas with strong

¹⁸ More about the *srei krup leakkhana*, the virtuous woman in chapter 4.

female presence and influence are not given much importance, as Jacobsen (:6) states:

Yet it appears that although Cambodian women have been represented at different times as 'powerless' in Western analyses, they have continued to exercise authority outside those areas of concern to Western constructs of power.

In short, the elaborations above show the significance of women throughout the history of Cambodia. Even though they didn't hold much political power and their influence might not be in areas of public attention, they still had considerable influence, particularly within the family network. This will be elaborated in the next chapter by examining the Cambodian social structure.

3. SOCIAL STRUCTURE

Understanding the social structure is paramount for a study on the role of women. This chapter includes some demographic data and gender statistics, the legal situation in Cambodia related to gender, examines different aspects of the social structures and interactions as well as gender roles in the community and family.

3.1 Some demographic data and statistics related to gender

The last population census in 2008 showed that Cambodia had a population of 13.4 millions with 51.4 percent being women. About 80 percent of the population are living in rural areas (NIS 2011:8). These proportions remained quite stable by 2010 (Hang 2012:15) and there was a slight increase in the urban population in 2014 (NIS 2015:3).

The population pyramid of Cambodia reflects the recent history of war: in 2010, 45 percent of the population were under twenty years and more than half of the population under thirty years old. There were less people in their thirties than what would be the normal shape of the pyramid, which is a result of the civil war and genocide of the Khmer Rouge in the 1970s. Apparently for the same reason the number of women compared to men over 45 years is markedly higher (Cambodia 2011:9-10).

Statistics on marital status according to the “Cambodia: Demographic and health Survey 2010” (Cambodia 2011:87-88) show that women generally get married at a younger age than men. There are still women who get married by the age of 15, though this number is declining and about 25 percent of all women get married by the age of 18, compared to zero percent of men married by age 15 and less than 9 percent at age 18. The average age of a woman when she first marries is about 20 years and 23 years for a man. The age at first marriage also implies that a couple is ready to have children.

Men seem much more likely to remarry after losing their spouse or getting divorced. This is indicated by the significantly higher percentages of women who are widowed or divorced compared to men. Furthermore, in the age group under 24 years (which includes the population from fifteen years up, whereas the age of consent according to the civil code is eighteen), nearly twice as many women are married compared to men in the same age group, whereas among the people over sixty-five, there are a lot more

married men (NIS 2011:12).

Traditionally the man is the head of the household. Women headed 27 percent of households in 2010, the number being slightly bigger in urban areas (Cambodia 2011:11). This usually means that there is no man in the household, but it can also be that he is unable to care for the family, for example because of a disability.

The Ministry of Women's Affairs (MoWA) was established in 1996 and is assigned to promote gender mainstreaming at the government level. On request of the MoWA, a Gender Mainstreaming Action Group was established in 2006. A gender statistics working group was formed in 2007. Before 2006 no specific gender statistics had been done, though the data gathered had been divided by sex (Hang, 2012:5-6;8).

3.2 Social organization of rural Cambodian communities

In this section I will analyse the role of women in the community by describing how people live together in the community, examining hierarchy and patronage, which are strongly shaping Khmer social organisation, and looking at the legal situation for women compared to men.

3.2.1 Describing the community in a village

The main anthropological research of Khmer peasant culture before the Khmer Rouge period was done by May Ebiara in her doctoral thesis "Svay, a Khmer Village in Cambodia" (1968). Most likely the majority of rural villages had their origin in groups of houses of close relatives (:93). As the children got married and other relatives came to live there, the village was growing. The rural Khmer tended to marry someone from the same or a nearby village. In the case of Svay, Ebiara (:99-104) found that although about three quarter of the marriages were exogamous to the village, the majority of them married partners from villages within a radius of fifteen kilometres and half even within a radius of five kilometres from their village. She explains that different factors influenced this situation, including economic reasons as the paddy fields of the families were quite small already and had to be divided among the children. Therefore they

would encourage them to find a spouse in a village where more land for cultivation was available. The circumstances of the families involved seem to play a big role in these decisions. This was confirmed by other research such as the one mentioned by Ledgerwood and Vijghen (2002:112), where the vast majority married inside the village and for those who did not, it was mainly for economic reasons and mostly it was the men who married outside, whereas women tended to stay in the village. Both cases show that very few people got married to a place far away. Therefore it is quite common that most people in a village are somehow related to each other. Kinship is a key foundation for the relationships in a village and “the base for the formation and functioning of a Khmer peasant community” (:113).

The basic socio-economic unit of a village is the household, which might consist of a nuclear family or include extended family members living together (Ebihara 1968:92). When villagers exchange labour for certain tasks, this is always calculated in terms of the amount of labour that the family or household owes to the other family, not the individual. Also, when the community is asking for contributions from the villagers for things like community projects or ceremonies, these are rather seen as gifts from a family or household, than from an individual (:111).

The household structure is influenced by social and economic factors. Nuclear households are prevalent, but after 2000 the number decreased. They tend to be more prone to poverty than extended families. As a result of poverty, divorce and high unemployment rates, an increasing number of families were therefore caused to live together as multigenerational families again for economic reasons (Demont & Heuveline 2008:6;18-19).

Ebihara (1968:94;104) found that villagers generally have a deep distrust and fear of strangers and unknown areas, which also explains that no-one is likely to move into a new village unless they have some connections to a family that already lives there. Crochet (2011:145) refers to more recent studies which confirm similar patterns: families moving to the city tend to settle close to their kin, or female migrant workers, who get their jobs through relatives, will also stay with them. The fact that a distrust towards strangers had prevailed in the early 1960s implies that it is not a result of all the

years of war and terror, as one might be inclined to assume, but had already existed before those years of conflict.

Apart from the kin groups, there were no social groups in the villages, nothing that connected the villagers between the household and the whole community (Ebihara 1968:181). This and the suspicion of people they do not know might explain “the absence of a rural community” stated by Delvert (quoted in Ebihara 1968:210). Forms of mutual aid existed, but they were limited to small villages, hamlets or remote settlements; in bigger villages, people only cared for neighbouring families. However, solidarity in the village is a debatable issue. Ebihara disagrees about this lack of social cohesion. She found in West Svay “that the villagers do have a sense of community” (:215). Crochet (2011:145) also mentions interactions, common activities and friendships with villagers outside their kin group, although most social life takes place within the wider family and in times of crisis it is they who come to help and look after each other. It seems that the community in the Cambodian villages has never been very strong, but it has existed to a certain extent, although the main bonds are between kinsmen. These kinship relationships, however, might be defined quite broadly according to Davis (2008:133):

Family boundaries appear loose, and various types of adoption, god-parenting, and other forms of 'fictive kinship' have been documented. One's created family, in addition to one's birth family, produces the known and civilized world that we inhabit. This network of family members defines and delimits the boundaries of the social world, the land in which one may safely travel, the people one may trust and upon whom one may rely [...] and where we can navigate with more experience and confidence than with strangers. People say that this is true of family members all the way, potentially, to the 'seventh generation', but in practice it is said precisely to assert some sort of kinship with relative strangers.

Religious practices like attending ceremonies and the celebration of rituals at the wat were the almost only things that the unrelated families in a village had in common. They can help bring people together and bring about the formation of a loose community. Practices of making merit like giving alms also have a positive effect on relationships in the village as people who give will be liked and respected by the others - it is a way of showing that someone is trustworthy and cares about others (Ledgerwood 2008:155;159; Ovesen 1996:15). My personal experience confirms that activities which bring people together help build trust. This was the case with

community savings groups, that proved to strengthen community in the village. A survey that was conducted among savings group members in several villages in Anlong Veng district in the North of Cambodia, in order to evaluate the saving groups facilitated by the international relief and development organisation *Food for the Hungry* (FH) Cambodia, included a question about changes in the village since they started the groups. Several people mentioned that through the regular, monthly meetings of the savings groups, where they discussed different issues, the members got to know and trust each other and started helping each other and doing things together whereas before they had hardly any contacts in the village outside the family network.

3.2.2 Hierarchy

The social structure in Cambodia is strongly hierarchical, where respect for elders and people in high positions is essential. Since the Angkorean period Cambodian society has traditionally been divided into three classes, the royalty, the officials and the peasants, which form the vast majority. To a certain extent this still exists today. The peasantry can be divided further according to their wealth into the *neak mean*, the 'people who have', or the rich people, the *neak kuesam*, the 'people who have enough' to live quite comfortably and the *neak kra*, the 'poor people'. It was and is very difficult, if not nearly impossible, “to climb up the social ladder” (Ovesen et al 1996:15).

Veneration for the king came to a climax in the *devaraja* cult as it was practiced by the kings of Angkor, who were revered as god-kings (see 2.1.2). But even in the nineteenth century the king still had the highest authority. The governors who administered the different provinces were appointed by the king and also the other officials of higher and lower ranks were loyal to the royal family. Theoretically anyone could be nominated for positions of authority, but the selection of the officials happened mainly in line with patron-client relationships, “as a reward for services rendered or favors done, or in response to gifts presented to a higher-ranking patron or the king” (Hansen 2004:45).

Hierarchy is also expressed in the terms used to address people, based on the system of *bong* (older) and *b'oun* (younger). It is important that anyone older is treated with

respect. *Bong* and *b'oun* are important kinship terms, '*bong b'oun*' (literally older and younger) is the Khmer word for relatives. The term is not only used for siblings in the family, but also for not related people who are within a similar age group. Older people might be addressed by *pu* (uncle) or *ming* (aunt) if they are younger than one's parents, *om* (uncle or aunt) if older than one's parents or *yey* (grandmother) or *ta* (grandfather) for old people. People in any teaching position or doctors are called *lokru* (for males) or *neakru* (for females). In addition to that, there are special ways to address high officials and, of course, royalty. Apart from the age, sex and position define one's place in society as well, although age is more so than sex with regard to status. *Bong* or 'elder' is not only used for people of higher age, but can also include younger people who have more knowledge, power or wealth. The wife always calls her husband *bong* and he calls her *b'oun*, regardless of their age. Men working in any service position, for example mototaxi drivers, are usually called *pu* (uncle), whereas a waitress is addressed as *b'oun srey* (younger sister) (Martin 1994:11; Ledgerwood 1992:3).

A woman's status is associated with her family and, when she is married, especially with the husband's family. The place of a woman in the hierarchy also becomes visible in her behaviour, how she complies with the cultural ideals, such as described in the *chbab srey* (see 3.6). High status is demonstrated by appropriate conduct (:4-6).

Throughout most of Cambodian history people in powerful positions were regarded as being more meritorious than others, in accordance with the theory of karma in Theravada Buddhism, which dictates that social rank is a result of merit accumulated in previous lives (Chandler 1996a:2; Harris 2005:27).

3.2.3 Patronage

A Cambodian proverb says: “The rich take care of the poor as the skirt wraps from the outside”. This implies that privilege entails responsibility - fortunate people are expected to help those who are underprivileged whereas the latter owe them their respect and services in return. As one's high position is seen as a result of merit in previous lives, the person should also demonstrate meritorious actions and have a moral responsibility towards their subordinates. This shows in the patron-client relationships,

which have existed in varying forms throughout Cambodian history. They are for the benefit of both parties: the power of the patron is strengthened and the client receives support and protection in exchange for services and loyalty. With all the changes in society these patronage relationships are changing, too - the ties have weakened but they continue to exist. However, patrons nowadays tend to be less committed to meet their obligations. This can be attributed to the fact that they have more connections outside the village that give them power, so their local clients lose importance for them. Khmer patronage as it is practiced today can be characterized, using the words of Ledgerwood and Vijghen (:115), as “a flexible system of loyalties and obligations, of protection and support that may vary to some degree and may include overlapping patronages. But the main keywords are flexible or 'loose’”. Despite the fact that these bonds have weakened, patronage continues to be “the core of Khmer social organization” (:110).

3.2.4 Legal situation

Cambodian law calls for gender equality. Cambodia has signed international agreements, like the *Convention for the Elimination of all forms of Discrimination Against Women* (CEDAW), which was ratified in 1992. According to Article 31 of the Cambodian constitution from 1993, men and women are equal before the law and Article 46 prohibits all kinds of discrimination against women (JICA 2007:11; LICADHO 2004:12). In practice, there is still a long way to go to fully implement this. Although different NGOs and human rights groups like the *Cambodian League for the Promotion and Defence of Human Rights* (LICADHO) are raising awareness and educating in this, there are still many women, especially in rural areas, who do not know their rights (LICADHO 2004:9).

Gender equality has now been integrated into the main policy documents but the implementation of strategies and action steps in order to achieve these goals in the different sectors and meet the requirements of CEDAW still poses a challenge (MoWA 2008:24).

Regarding the family, men and women have the same rights, but some practices are “discriminatory” for women, as indicated in the *Social Institutions and Gender Index*

(2014:1):“Cambodian law grants men and women equal rights in terms of parental authority, although in traditional Cambodian culture, pregnancy and child care are the responsibility of women, who must also continue their normal duties in addition”. Men and women further have

the same rights to divorce, which can be requested by mutual consent, or on the basis of one or several of a list of acceptable grounds. However, the law stipulates that women must wait 120 days after dissolution of a marriage before they can marry again, although there is no similar waiting period for men (:1).

According to the Civil Code of Cambodia (2008: Art. 1037), in case of a divorce, the parents need to reach an agreement about the “parental power holder of the child”, and if they cannot come to an agreement, the court has to decide, “taking into account the interests of the child”.

Both, men and women “can pass on Cambodian citizenship to their children” (SIGI 2014:9). The Civil Code further “provides women and men equal inheritance rights both as daughters and widows” (SIGI 2014:1).

The rights to land and other property are also equal for Cambodian men and women. But because poverty rate is generally high in Cambodia and there are many people without land, the ability of women to make use of these rights is limited. This affects especially the female heads of household. The Sub Decree on Social Land Concessions therefore stated that “[i]n order to ensure the land policy responds to all citizens’ needs, such policy must respond to women’s needs, especially women heads of household” (quoted in SIGI 2014:6). Both men and women are entitled to inherit property. Land is therefore usually divided among all the children, sons and daughters alike (Ledgerwood 1995:256). The law on marriage and family from 1989 governs the provisions on women's rights for property. It distinguishes between joint and separate property. Both spouses keep the property that they brought into marriage and can dispose of it independently. The property they acquired during the marriage belongs to both, husband and wife, and they both need to agree on decisions about it's use. But “[m]any women choose to leave their husbands in charge of most matters related to property ownership, meaning they effectively lose their rights over joint property, placing them at a distinct disadvantage in the event of divorce” (:6). The same law further protects women (and

men) from forced marriages and prohibits polygamy.

3.2.5 Roles of women in the community

In Khmer society there is no strict division of labour according to gender. Many tasks can be performed by either men or women. Even though there are activities that might be considered typical for males or females, in daily life they might also be done by the opposite sex if necessary. Often men and women work together, sharing the physical work as well as the planning. In general household tasks are typical for women whereas the duties of men are mainly outside the house and they do the physically hard work. However, especially in female headed households where there are no men, women also have to do more hard labour. In the rice fields it is usually the men doing the ploughing and threshing while women do all the other tasks from transplanting to harvesting (Ebihara 1968:190; Ledgerwood 1992:93-96; 1995:256; Davis 2008:136).

Besides household and agricultural labour there are more gender specific ways of earning money. Women are for example more likely to be engaged in selling at the market, doing small scale trade, whereas common jobs for men are as drivers of motorbike-taxis, tuc-tucs, taxis etc. (Ledgerwood 1992:96-97).

Already in the Angkorean period it was the Khmer women who were the traders, according to the account of Chou Ta-Kuan about his visit to Cambodia in the late thirteenth century. In there he suggested that his countrymen coming to Cambodia for trade should find a Cambodian spouse because a Khmer woman would be of great benefit for them (Jacobsen 2008:62). The influential role of Cambodian women in trade has not changed much since. Women are still in charge of the small-scale markets, they usually manage the family finances and decide on purchases, borrowing and lending. In their role as merchants they even travel long distances in order to buy and sell goods (Ledgerwood 1995:256-257). Women may not have political power, but they do have authority. Ledgerwood (1992:98) states that “Cambodia is not, and probably never has been, a patriarchal society, in the traditional meaning of the term, that all power lies with men”. While it is the men who hold the power at the political level, on a social

level and most significantly within the household and extended family, the women have and used to have considerable authority. The number of women involved in politics and especially in higher positions is low compared to men, which is not unique to Cambodia, but compared to previous times, the number is clearly increasing (:14). The 1980s marked a change for the Khmer women, who traditionally used to be apolitical. In those years after the war their contributions were asked to help rebuild society. Women got involved in civil services and the women's association was established. Through the influence of NGOs starting to work in Cambodia and particularly those focusing on women's issues, the political awareness of Cambodian women grew (Krayansky 2007: 59-60). In the 1993 elections, five percent of those elected to the national assembly were women. This increased significantly to eleven percent in 1998 and nineteen percent in the 2003 elections. At the commune level the percentage of women who were elected nearly doubled from eight percent in the first commune council elections in 2002 to fifteen percent in 2007 (MoWA 2008:4).

Women in rural Cambodia have three areas of responsibility: managing the household, looking after the children and doing agricultural work, which is mainly subsistence rice farming or growing vegetables. More than half of the subsistence farmers are women. Females who are household heads are more likely to do agricultural work than their male counterparts, but they are also more often landless or have smaller plots of land (UNIFEM 2004:7). In addition to these responsibilities, women might still do extra work to earn money for the family. Most vendors selling cooked food or sweets on the streets are women, so are the sellers in the markets. Furthermore, women dominate the production of handicrafts, which they can often do at home, for example weave mats or different kinds of baskets or weave silk or cotton to make *kromas* (shawls) or materials for skirts. Older and younger women often work together on this (Friesen 2011:185).

Ebihara's (1968:191) findings from the early 1960s indicate that women had a "considerable degree of equality, voice and independence in village life" then, though usually they could not act nor move as freely as men did. Furthermore, men had "a superior social status according to both the secular legal code and Buddhist theology". According to popular Buddhist understanding being reincarnated as a woman is inferior

to a reincarnation as a man. But despite these restrictions, Ebihara's data suggests that there was a relative equality, with men's and women's roles complementing each other and women having a respected status, particularly within the family.

The situation for the women in Cambodia changed during the years of war in the 1970s. Under the Khmer Rouge regime, families were broken apart when co-operatives were implemented. People were organised in work groups according to age and sex, and meals had to be taken all together in a common place. The traditional roles of the women and their context of major influence basically no longer existed. They might still have continued to do their traditional tasks as some were in charge of preparing and distributing food or controlling the food supplies, but they lost the status and respect that was originally given to the providers of these tasks within the family. Women who were put into influential positions in Democratic Kampuchea such as the control of food supplies or medicine, or security positions including those who had to spy out people's background and as leaders of the youth groups, usually were poor peasant women who had not received any education (Friesen 2011:179-181).

More women than men survived the Khmer Rouge, so the number of widows was high and more of them headed the household. Such households are more prone to poverty, to “losing their land, becoming chronically indebted or becoming marginalised as less valued and respected members of society” (:172). This assessment is reflected in the demographic and human-development indicators. Land is an important asset in rural Cambodia where most people rely on subsistence farming for their livelihood. Female-headed households are more at risk of becoming landless for different reasons: the illiteracy rate of women is higher than that of men and consequently they hardly know about land titles. According to their socialisation it is the women's task to take care of elderly parents, and when they have to buy things like expensive medicine, they might need to spend their savings or sell their possessions or land. Moreover, women are more likely than men to lose their land in case of a divorce (:186). Friesen (:181) mentions that there were three separate socioeconomic surveys done in the 1990s, in rural Cambodia, which demonstrate that female-headed households on average possess less land. The low percentage of female-headed households that possess agricultural land in the countryside could be due to insufficient labour to work the land, especially when

there is no man in the household who can do the heavy work. They can therefore not claim more land.

Apart from the economic consequences, the period of war also affected the relationship between women and men, as described by people interviewed by Friesen (2011:171), such as the following statement of a female Khmer teacher:

Before the war, women were respected, they had status that was valued whether in roles as mothers, or daughters, or as teachers or nuns. But since the war years, women have lost their value, and women and men in villages do not have the same relationships that they once did.

Chea Vannath, director of the Centre for Social Development in Phnom Penh also stated that “husbands and wives were in better balance” before the war and that there was less domestic violence (:171). The relationship between spouses as well as the social status of the women and their dignity had been deteriorating since the Khmer Rouge regime (:173). In a social system where patronage relationships are a core component, these impaired relationships between men and women further impacted the women as they did not have “access to the powerful patronage networks” (:174), and without those, practically no access to public positions.

The *krom samakki* ('solidarity groups') that were established after the Vietnamese took over addressed immediate needs in the sense that they made it possible for widows to produce food for their families. The members would work together on the fields, sharing labour while tools were provided. All members would then receive a share of the harvest according to the amount of labour they contributed (Krayanski 2007:13). The living conditions were still very difficult, but the *krom samakki* enabled women who lacked manpower and means of agricultural production to support themselves. Without them it would not have been possible for them to start planting again. The solidarity groups only functioned for three rainy seasons, until the beginning of 1982, when the land was distributed (Amakawa 2008:10).

While the socio-economic consequences of the war are slowly being overcome and the demographic proportions between male and female equalizing, there is no significant change in the prevalence of the female headed households, because at the same time the divorce rate is increasing and so is the number of households where the man does not

live with his family for job-related reasons (Demont & Heuveline 2008:19).

In the past two decades, gender issues have been addressed by many NGOs as well as by the Cambodian government. Efforts show for example in the budget of the Ministry of Education, Youth and Sport, with initiatives that benefit girls (MoWA 2004:8;12-15). Significant improvements have been made, especially in the urban areas, whereas the rural areas development is slow, as they are more difficult to reach. Gender equality remains an issue to be worked on, but the awareness is increasing. An introducing paragraph in a booklet by the National Institute of Statistics on “Women and Men in Cambodia” (NIS 2011:7) reflects high appreciation for the contribution of women and the intention to improve their situation:

Women are the backbone of our economy and society and the Royal Government has exerted its utmost efforts to improve the status of women through implementation of the Strategic Plan of Neary Ratanak or 'Women are Precious Stones,' aimed at providing Cambodian women with value and hope in life, while promoting gender mainstreaming.

3.3 Family

Family in the Cambodian context is a very broad term and is not clearly defined. It might include different grades of kinship. If not otherwise specified, I am using the term for the nuclear family consisting of father, mother and children.

3.3.1 Khmer kinship

Khmer kinship patterns are now usually recognized as bilateral (Ebihara 1968; Ledgerwood 1995). But, according to Ledgerwood (1995:247), many scholars claimed that Cambodia used to be a matriarchy in ancient times. This has also been taken as a fact by Khmer scholars and been taught in Cambodian universities. They trace it back to the Funan period. Sar ([1973] 2003:1-2) argues that it also shows in “titles of important positions, in educational maxims, and in common social beliefs” that “matriarchy is a basic principle of [Khmer] social organization”. As examples, he lists kinship terms where the female is usually named first (“mother and father”, “aunt and uncle” etc), the

use of the Khmer word *me*, as well as social beliefs and sayings. *Me* means 'mother', but also 'chief', 'leader' etc. It is used in combined words like police chief (*me polih*), commander of the armed forces (*me toap*), village chief (*me phum*), head of the household (*me pteah*) and many more. Other factors that led people to conclude that women were very influential and equal to their spouse and have been interpreted as evidence for ancient matriarchy include: the fact that some positions that have been passed on matrilineally in priestly families, the descriptions of women in the records of Chou Ta-Kuan “as light-skinned, sexually free, engaging in commerce, acting as court astrologers, and participating in palace rituals” (Ledgerwood 1995:255) and their good education. But he is referring to the women at the court and therefore it cannot be concluded from these examples that the whole society was organised like that. The women at the palace did have considerable influence, yet this was not true for Cambodian women in general and cannot be used as proof that Cambodia was a matriarchy. There is not enough evidence to say for sure what kind of society Cambodia was in ancient times, whether patriarchal or matriarchal (:251-255).

Ledgerwood (1995:247) points out that research done in Cambodia before the Khmer Rouge by Ebihara (1968), as well as by Gabrielle Martel and Malada Kalab, two other anthropologists, all showed that Khmer kinship is bilateral (cognatic), which means that descent is traced through both the female and the male line. According to Ebihara's (1968: 94-96) findings, there are some aspects where one line is emphasized. Surnames, for example, are usually passed on through the father and residence patterns more often follow the maternal line. There is also some kinship terminology that has been interpreted by many scholars as indicating matrilineal descent in the past, mainly the Khmer word for 'cousin' (*bong b'oun ji daun muoy*), that literally means 'older/younger [having] one grandmother'. However, as Judy Ledgerwood (1995:251) points out, it is used for cousins on mother's (matrilateral) and father's (patrilateral) side and can therefore also be traced through the father. The system is flexible and tendencies towards one side are mainly because of the specific situation. The general characteristics Ebihara (1968:95) found in Khmer social structure “are consistent with Murdock's characterization of the bilateral or Eskimo type of cognatic social organization that is widespread in Southeast Asia” whereas hardly any of the distinctive

features for a matrilineal system is represented.

The fact that the Khmer kinship system is organised bilaterally is a reason that Cambodian women might be perceived as relatively equal to men and having power. As the stress can be on either line, the situation might put an emphasis on the female side, especially when the young couple is living with the bride's family upon marriage or close to them. Then the relatives of the wife might play a more important role in their lives and the female side is likely to be perceived as dominant (Ledgerwood 1995:256). The influential position of the wife in the home, managing the household and family finances, might further contribute to this view, which, however, does not take into account the socio-political factors.

Kinship is the foundation of Khmer society, with the nuclear family being the basic socio-economic unit of a village. The strongest relationships exist between relatives and more specifically within the nuclear family, between husband and wife, between siblings and especially between parents and children (Ebihara 1968:110-111). These relationships are also the most enduring and are believed to continue “throughout lives” as illustrated in the story of Miss Naan, who remembered her past lives. Davis (2008) recorded that Miss Naan, a prosperous woman from Kampong Cham province, got married and had two children, but died when the older child was only four years old. She was reborn as a tree-spirit and later as a human again, this time in Prey Veng province. She remembered all these three lives and her memories were confirmed to be true by her original family (the one of her previous life). When she went to meet them again, they addressed her according to her original position in the family as 'older sister' or 'mother', even though they were all older than her. She has kept in contact with her two families. “She cared for her original father until his death, thereafter returning to school. Her aged mother from this life married her off at the age of 16, to a teacher who died shortly after the fall of Phnom Penh as a recent inductee into Lon Nol's armed forces” (Davis 2008:137). She survived the Khmer Rouge regime, losing one child and her mother. Davis was able to visit and interview her about her memories of her past lives. For Khmer people it is very important to care for their ancestors.

3.3.2 Marriage

According to the civil code marriage within the nuclear family is prohibited, but with other kins it is possible, including marriage among cousins, which is “not uncommon” (Ebihara 1968:98). Traditionally the parents would look for a spouse for their children, and there are still many families where it is done this way (LICADHO 2004:14), but nowadays the final decision is usually made by the possible couple themselves. There is a Khmer saying that 'the cake is not bigger than the scale'¹⁹, which implies that the children can't make important decisions, such as finding a good spouse, better than their parents. In a collectivist culture like Cambodia marriage is not just seen as two individuals joining together, but it links two extended families (Ledgerwood 1992:9).

When a couple gets married the man has to pay some kind of 'bride-price' to the bride's family, which, on the one hand, is provision for the new couple as they will keep some of it (for example in form of a house, jewellery or a contribution to the wedding expenses). This is also called *thlay phtea* ('the worth of a house'), which expresses the idea of giving a financial provision instead of building a new house. On the other hand, it also represents “a transfer of rights over the woman, her sexuality, her labour, and so on, by providing payments to her parents, who fed and cared for her” (Ledgerwood 1995:252). The women usually bring material wealth into the marriage. These will remain their possessions and in the case of a divorce they can take it back. It is quite easy to initiate a divorce for both men and women, but both partners need to agree, which might be a reason that Ledgerwood (1995:256) found that it was “easier for a man to divorce a woman than vice versa”.

There are no specific norms about where the couple resides after marriage, as this very much depends on the circumstances. Ebihara (1968:108-110; 123-131) noticed that in general there might be a slight preference for having their own, separate place (neolocality), or they might stay with the parents of one of the spouses. Often there are economic reasons for this decision, like having no money to build a house. If they stay with the parents, it is more often the wife's parents. Important factors for these decisions

¹⁹ In Khmer: នំមិនធំជាងនាវា.

are land and property. They will live where there is more land available, more property, a bigger house, etc. There can also be family reasons, for example if a parent is widowed and needs the support of the opposite sex to help with the typical masculine (hard labour) or feminine (household) tasks, or to care for elderly parents. There is no clear rule which child has to stay to look after the parents; it can be any of their children, boy or girl, firstborn or younger. Those who stay would typically inherit the house and land when the parents die.

More couples are inclined to stay in the village of the wife upon marriage. There are several reasons for that, but the main one is probably the fact that girls need to be protected much more than boys and it is more difficult for them to leave the security of their homes, whereas boys are brought up to be more independent. Traditionally it was common for the man to move in with the bride's family to work for them for a certain time before they got married, by which they would get to know him well (Ledgerwood 1992:8). Another reason for uxorilocality (the man going to stay with the wife's family), which was observed by Ebihara (1968:254), but not noticed (or at least not mentioned) by the villagers was, that it was more often the women than the men who inherited the rice fields. In general, land was often passed on from the mother to the daughter (:94). As land is often passed on to the children upon marriage (Ovesen et al 1996:55), this might as well have been a result of uxorilocality instead of a reason for it. But women are clearly more attached to their families than men. This is also manifested in the fact that the most common reason for migration for women is to follow their family, much more than men (NIS 2011:14).

3.3.3 Children and parenting

Khmer people generally like children, boys and girls alike. Babies and infants receive a lot of attention from everyone. Generally Cambodians don't have a special preference for boys or girls - they are both welcome. Smith (1999:106) points out that mothers often like to have a girl first. Girls help in the household and take over responsibilities so that the mother is free to do other tasks. This shows in the saying “Having a girl first

you can earn a living more easily”²⁰. Another saying also expresses the big help that a daughter is for the mother: “A daughter replaces the mother's hands and legs”²¹. Moreover “a daughter is more likely than a son to support and care for her parents in their old age”.

It is important for the Khmer to have children. They “give status to their mother and power and authority to their father” (Kelley 1996:5). If a couple remains childless, people might think that there is something wrong with them, or they have a bad spirit, whereas children are seen as proof for the goodness of the family and that the spirits are pleased with them.

A difference in the way the Khmer bring up boys and girls can be noted from the beginning. “Boys are empowered to become strong and potent, whereas girls are held back and encouraged to internalize rather than express feelings and desires” (Kelley 1996:7).

Cambodians tend to let little children do what they want, without interfering much or setting clear boundaries. The only thing that parents do teach their children when they are still very small is the Buddhist greeting, *sampheah*, the way they put the palms together to greet people. Apart from that, they let them do almost anything, even things that if they do at an older age, they will be punished for, like hitting their mother (Martin 1994:10). This is influenced by the Buddhist belief of reincarnation. Every newborn child is thought to be a reincarnation and brings distinctive characteristics and talents from previous lives. The parents will therefore first observe the child to find out what remains from the past and about its karmic direction, rather than impose social norms on it. Apart from watching its behaviour closely, they also look for physical characteristics like birthmarks and try to find out what those might reveal about the child, its past and its future. Most Khmer think that parents should constantly be with the child in the first six months to two years and never leave it alone, especially not at night. Most children at that age would sleep next to their mother. A reason for that is also the fear of spirits, including the spirit of the child's mother from its previous life.

20 In Khmer: បានកូនស្រីដំបូង រកស៊ីធូរ.

21 In Khmer: កូនស្រីជំនួសដៃជើងម្តាយ.

There is a belief that if a baby cries a lot, it might be because of the spirit of the previous mother who has come to take it back (Kelley 1996:6-7).

Despite the constant contact, there is not much intentional interaction with the child, and “even moderate stimulation is avoided. Good babies are quiet and complacent. Mothers insist that too much stimulation will produce an overactive and demanding child” (Smith 1999:75-76). Another reason for letting little children do what they want without giving clear directions is the belief that a small child is not capable of understanding and therefore any discipline seems useless (:64). According to Khmer belief, young children cannot think deeply nor reason yet. The ability to have deep thoughts comes when they reach puberty and will get fully developed by the time they enter adult life, get married and have children (:94).

A main point of the moral education of Khmer children is to teach them the right attitudes and respect for senior people. This is apparent in the *sampheah*, and the fact that they learn it from very young age. The children first have to learn to respect their parents. “Khmer say that children must learn that their parents are their 'first gods' (*ovpuk mday chea preah knong pteah*), literally, their 'gods within the house'” (Smith 1999:95). Once they have learned respect at home, they can later extend it to their teachers, to ancestral spirits and Buddha.

Once the little children can move around by themselves, they are left to explore their environment without setting physical barriers. Their caregivers would rather distract them from danger or, once they can understand verbal instructions, they might use empty threats like “stop that, or the police will get you” in order to prevent them from doing something dangerous (Smith 1999:76).

When children are about five years old they gradually start spending more and more time playing with other children instead of being around their mother all the time. They also begin doing some small chores (Ebihara 1968:455).

When the children are about six or seven years old, which is also the age when they start school, parents would start educating their children. The mother usually teaches the girls, and the father the boys. The parents also expect that the children will learn some moral behaviour at school (Martin 1994:10-11). As the children become able to

understand and think rationally, they are no longer allowed to do anything they want, but their misbehaviour will be punished and they are required to behave correctly, also in order to contribute to the good reputation of the family (:95). There is “some inconsistency in the affection and discipline given a child past the age of three or four” (Ebihara 1968:452). Not only that, behaviours that were once tolerated during the previous years will now all of a sudden be punished and the same action might once cause amusement and be tolerated, but the next time there is disapproval instead. It is widely accepted – and practiced – for parents to beat children in order to correct their behaviour. This is even seen “as acting honourably in their effort to uphold the family's face and reputation, even though such physically abusive practices violate doctrinal Buddhism's tenets about violence” (Smith 1999:119).

Khmer parents usually want their children to excel. They might often tell them that they should always be right and better than others, which can cause them to become arrogant when they grow up (Martin 1994:15).

In general, the father is more authoritarian than the mother, who is perceived as “warm and protective” (Ebihara 1968:118). The Khmer think that girls need more protection, but that does not necessarily mean that they also get more affection. When the sons grow older they would do various tasks together with the father. Likewise the daughters would do household tasks together with the mother, and sometimes they become like good friends, especially if the mother is young. So boys and girls learn and are prepared for their future roles by doing things together with their parent. As they grow older and take over more tasks from the parents, responsibility for their actions grows as well, and they seem to increasingly respect their parents and obey their orders (:462).

There used to be a special practice for girls when they reach puberty. This ritual is called *choul mlub*, which means 'entering the shade'. It is performed when they get their first menstruation. The young woman would be kept socially isolated “in a darkened room and out of male view” (:311) for a period of three weeks to three months, sometimes even longer. During that time she would receive instruction in manners and behaviours appropriate for a young woman. By the time she came out of her seclusion,

there should be a transformation that can be noticed by everyone (Smith 1999:100-101). I could not find any evidence that this is still practiced nowadays.

There is no equivalent ritual for boys in the puberty, but they might ordain as novices for some time, which is also seen as a good preparation for marriage (:109). During their time at the monastery they study Buddhist scripture, learn to recite prayers and to act according to the Buddhist principles. These also include their responsibility toward their parents, which will be strengthened by this time of spiritual formation. Men who spent some time at the monastery and got this education are regarded as more likely to become a good husband, because they would be respectful and caring for their family (:112).

Moral and religious instruction also happens at religious or life-cycle ceremonies, such as engagements, weddings and different rituals such as those for raising money for a new school or temple. People can sponsor such a ceremony and hold it at their house. Monks then get invited to lead and recite prayers and give sermons, offerings are made and, like at any event, there is food (:114).

3.3.4 Roles and relationships within the family

The nuclear family is the basic social and economic unit in Khmer society. The relations and appropriate behaviour within the family are defined by cultural norms, legal statutes in the civil code and religious precepts such as Buddhist teachings and beliefs in ancestral spirits who watch over the behaviour of their descendants. People believe that they will be punished by the ancestral spirits if there is serious conflict within the family, between siblings or between parents and children. They might even punish an innocent kin for the misconduct of someone else; therefore they are also responsible for one another's actions (Ebihara 1968:120; Holt 2012:17; Harris 2005:163). These standards are stronger within the nuclear family than with more remote relatives. Family members are usually supportive and loyal towards each other and help each other in time of need (Ebihara 1968:111-112).

There is usually much solidarity within a Khmer family. A Cambodian proverb says

“Don't take inside fire out, nor bring outside fire in” (OMF 2005:3). Fire represents problems, so it means that when a family is experiencing trouble it should not be shared outside, neither should the family be bothered with problems from outside. Family members are expected to respect each other, show affection, take part in each other's lives and assist each other in times of need (Harris 2005:157-161).

According to the Cambodian civil code from 1959 the husband was given nearly all power and authority over his wife, the children and the household. Polygamy was still tolerated. This was changed in the new civil code which went into effect in 2011 and polygamy is now prohibited. The superior status of men was further supported by Buddhist doctrine. But Ebihara (1968:113-114) argues that despite their subordinate position and being expected to submit to their husbands, women still had “a number of rights and privileges”, for example, the right to initiate a divorce. The husband was obligated to provide “food, shelter, 'material and moral aid” (:113) for his wife. He could not take another wife or become a monk without her consent. According to Buddhist principles, the husband has to respect and be considerate of his wife. Though the law emphasized the husband's position of power in the family, in everyday life in the village, husband and wife were “virtually equal” as Ebihara (:113-114) points out:

The husband is technically the supreme authority who is owed deference, respect, and obedience by his family. But the peasant wife is by no means a totally docile and submissive creature. Her role in the maintenance of the family is critical and her activities are varied; she has a primary responsibility for the care of the children and household; she is coworker in the fields; she oversees and keeps the family budget; she shrewdly handles many financial transactions and often undertakes her own commercial ventures to earn money; she owns and can dispose of property in her own right; she assumes explicit legal authority over the household when her husband is dead, absent, incapacitated, etc. As a result, the wife and mother exerts considerable authority, both overt and covert, within her family.

The new civil code of Cambodia (tentative English translation done by JICA in 2008) incorporates gender equality and mutual support: “husband and wife shall cohabit (sic!), cooperate and assist each other” (Art. 966) and “[m]embers of families shall respect each other's rights and freedom, and shall support each other” (Art. 943.1).

Furthermore, the woman holds a strong, privileged position in the household. She is in charge of the household, raises the children and is in control of the family finances. Many husbands hand their income to their wife, who might then give him back some

money to spend. The wife's financial responsibility also includes decisions about daily purchases or even borrowing of money (Ledgerwood 1992:98). If the couple is living with the wife's family upon marriage, the husband also has to adjust to his in-laws. Apart from that, Khmer women often have considerable influence on their husbands and manage to impose their will on them in a flattering but strong and persistent way. Also if the husband is a powerful man, the wife might create her own sphere of influence, reflecting a Khmer proverb that says: "If you are a colonel, your wife is a general" (Martin 1994:26).

Parents are legally responsible to raise, nurture and educate their children and to protect them from dangers. They have the right to demand "obedience and respect, to discipline and punish [...] to consent to or veto a child's marriage etc" (Ebihara 1968:115). According to cultural norms and religious principles, parents are further expected to "act as moral guides" (:117), get a suitable spouse for their children, and provide for their future well-being. In return the children feel strongly obliged to support their parents especially when they are old.

The little children usually stay close by their mother and she takes them wherever she goes. They have therefore more interaction with her than with the father and hence develop deeper bonds. The mother is their "major source of sustenance and love" (Ebihara 1968:117). In the case of a divorce, most children choose to go with their mother. This special emotional tie with the mother is also expressed in sayings like "A father is worth a thousand friends and a mother worth a thousand fathers" (:118) or "Rather a father should die than a mother; rather sink midstream than have your house burn down" (OMF 2005:3). Losing a father is compared to a boat sinking in the middle of the river, which is related to the loss of livelihood, but losing a mother is like becoming homeless. The relationship between mother and child is seen as "the most crucial relationship of comfort in Khmer society" (Davis 2008:130), even more important than the relationship between husband and wife.

From the age of about six or seven, children take over small chores and girls are usually able to do some basic cooking by the age of about ten (Ebihara 1968:457). They also start looking after younger siblings from a very young age (:452). As teenagers, the

children begin to take

an increasingly active role in household and subsistence tasks. Boys learn the techniques of rice cultivation, driving oxcarts, repairing tools, elementary carpentry, etc. Girls transplant and harvest alongside their mothers, learn how to cook various dishes, sew, and act as real surrogate mothers for younger siblings (:461-462).

Some teenagers might also take on paid work to earn some money for themselves and to support the family. This is also the time when they start to participate more actively in ceremonies like weddings, or serve at temple festivals. Furthermore, they start feeling responsible for their deeds, as well as a need for making merit, out of fear that bad behaviour might provoke vengeance by the spirits (:462).

A young, unmarried woman is well protected, whereas, once she is married and has children, she can move more freely and has more authority. Despite this protection, teenage girls especially in poor families still have to help support the family, which might include going to the town to sell goods, travelling to the capital on their own to find work in a factory or even as construction workers etc. (Ledgerwood 1992:5-6).

The tie between parents - not only mothers - and children are generally very strong. Ebihara (1968:119) described them as “the strongest and most enduring relationships in village life”. These bonds remain after a child gets married and has his or her own family. The families would visit each other frequently and support and care for each other in times of need. The children always feel an obligation towards their parents and think that they owe them care and respect, whether they are still living at home or are married and have their own household. These responsibilities towards the parents include not only helping with household tasks and supporting them economically, but also spiritual aspects.

The spiritual responsibilities are different for boys and girls. Girls usually get involved in activities at the temple at a much younger age than boys. They might prepare and deliver offerings, tasks that are “defined within the context of the household” (Smith 1999:111) and therefore perceived as part of the female role. Boys, on the other hand, can earn a lot of merit becoming a monk for a certain time.

3.3.5 Decision making in the household

The research of Ebihara (1968) and that of Ledgerwood (1992) both demonstrate that women are actively involved in decisions in the household. Not only do they manage the family finances, including borrowing money, they are also making most of the decisions about how the money is spent (Ledgerwood 1992:1). Normally they decide spending on food and clothing by themselves. Other things might be decided jointly with their husband, though that is handled differently in the different families. Ledgerwood (:99) did not find any specific patterns, but her survey clearly indicated that they are decision makers not only in the household but also farming.

The *Cambodia: Demographic and Health Survey 2010* (Cambodia 2011:203-204) asked questions about three types of decisions: related to “their own healthcare”, “major household purchases” and “visits to the wife's family or relatives”. The answers showed that women usually participate in making these decisions. About 45 percent decide about their own healthcare and the majority decide jointly with their husbands about major purchases and about visiting the wife's relatives. Younger women are generally less involved in these decisions than older women and women in rural areas less than those in the cities.

3.4 Education

There have been significant improvements regarding the education of girls in the last two decades. The literacy rate of females compared to males aged 15 to 24 years went up to 95.7% in the 2008 census (UNICEF 2011:4). The literacy rate of women is comparable to men in the age group under 24 years, with even a slightly higher rate of literate women compared to men in the 2014 socio-economic census, but note that if they are older, the percentage of women who are literate is lower (NIS 2015:50). Throughout the country, literacy rate is higher among men than among women and it is generally higher in the city than in the rural areas (NIS 2015:49).

The school attendance rate²² of boys and girls is about equal up to those aged 14, with girls' attendance even slightly higher up to those aged 10, but from 15 years old

²² School attendance and enrolment are sometimes used for the same thing, it seems that there is no distinction made between the two terms in Cambodia (NIS 2015:50).

onwards, there are significantly more boys than girls attending school (Cambodia 2011:16). Over a period of ten years (2004 to 2014), the attendance rate in primary schools increased by ten percent among girls, with seven percent among boys (NIS 2015:52). Girls in rural areas tend to stop their education early for various reasons: to help support the family by working in the house or in the fields, looking after younger siblings, etc. Some families are just too poor to send all their children to school - though school is theoretically free, they still have to pay for handouts, books, school uniforms, etc., which can make up a big part of the family expenses. Families who do not have enough money would rather decide to send the boys to school than the girls (Ledgerwood 1992:13). In many cases it is the oldest girl in a family with many children who cannot go to school, because her help is needed at home (:28). In rural areas, secondary schools are often a long distance away from the home, while smaller villages do not even have a secondary school, so the children have to go to another village. Therefore it might be an aspect of protection when girls cannot continue their education, especially when there is no one to accompany them. Among the older generation, some families did not want to educate their girls or took them out of school early, fearing that, if they can read and write, they might write love letters to boys (:34). Those “were seen as a landmine in the field of arranged marriages, as they could be used to prove that the girl concerned was not a virgin” (Jacobsen 2008:191), which would have negative consequences for the woman and her family.

In the context of the Cambodia socio-economic survey 2014 (NIS 2015:57) 6 to 17 years olds, who do not attend school, were asked about the reasons for not attending, 34 percent of the girls and 25 percent of the boys said that they have to contribute to the household income. More boys (22 percent compared to 16 percent girls) said that they did not want to go to school.

In Cambodia there have been Buddhist works of moral instruction, as those found all over Asia, since probably as early as the fourteenth century. Many more works have been written since, mostly by Buddhist monks who were teaching at monastic schools and had to prepare their own materials. These texts, the *chbab*, were usually quite short and written in verse form. They were intended to educate children, both boys and girls,

who would mostly learn them in the form of a song (Harris 2005:86). Traditional Buddhist education existed in Cambodia long before the French protectorate - mainly to teach Buddhist scriptures, by rote, but also included some practical skills like carpentry (:124).

Modern Buddhist education started in 1908 and was re-established after the war in 1989. For many poor people it was the only hope to get an education. but the Buddhist schools also face many challenges mainly due to lack of funds (Khy 2008:268-269). The curriculum was gradually extended, with new subjects added, “so that by 1912 it included the study of arithmetic, the metric system, and 'general knowledge,' alongside Khmer reading and writing” (Harris 2005:125). The monks also produced textbooks with the support of the French. The first work was on moral education and shortly after that, “works on geography, history, and biology” (:125). Women were not taught at the Buddhist schools, but their only option to get an education was to attend the schools for girls established by the French, which were not very popular outside Phnom Penh. This situation started improving following the reforms that were implemented in the 1920s (Jacobsen 2008:169).

The Khmer education system generally focuses on recitation and memorisation. Tith Huon's thesis (quoted in Martin 1994:14) analysing aspects of Cambodian society, particularly its traditional education, points out that “[i]n Cambodia, importance is given to recitation rather than to reflection and to the diploma rather than to learning”. Critical thinking has never been encouraged, whether in secular or Buddhist education. For the Buddhists, the *dharma* has to be accepted without questioning. As for the secular system, Jacobsen (2008:171) attributes the lack of reflection and critical thinking to the fact that the French did not want the legitimacy of their presence being questioned.

The *chbab* remained in the curriculum till after independence, as the texts used for Khmer language and literature studies in secondary schools were based on them (Martin 1994:10). They are thought to reflect true traditional Khmer thinking, without foreign influence.

3.5 The role of women in Cambodian folktales: an example

Folktales reflect social and cultural customs and values; people grow up with folktales, which may influence their thinking, though unconsciously. Cambodian folktales can therefore help us understand the Cambodian mindset. Written down for the first time at the end of the nineteenth century, many were stories of powerful women, who are often represented as smarter or braver than men (Jacobsen 2008:131;135-136).

An example that illustrates the proper behaviour of a *srey krup leakkh*²³, a virtuous woman, is the story entitled '*mea yoeng*' ('our uncle'), also known as '*srey kanhchoe thlūh*', 'the woman with holes in her basket'. Judy Ledgerwood (1994:120-121) summarized it in English as follows:

In the time of a compassionate and illustrious king, there lived in great misery a poor fisherman and his wife. The woman carried the fish her husband caught in a basket, but the basket was full of holes and many of the fish escaped. The woman was lazy and careless, and did not bother to repair the basket. One day a merchant vessel was passing along the river, and the wife of the chief of this vessel spied the fisherman's wife and called out to her, 'Hey! Why don't you stop up the holes in your basket?'

The merchant was angry at his wife, and also saw the remarkable beauty of the woman with the holes in her basket. He demanded that the fisherman exchange wives with him. His wife, being a *srey krūap lēakkh*, a perfectly virtuous woman, willingly followed her husband's orders; the woman with the holes in her basket was overjoyed at the prospect of being the rich man's wife and the poor fisherman was too afraid to object, so the switch occurred.

The virtuous woman patched the basket and the catch increased significantly, so much so that she even suggested that he share some with their neighbors, who promptly decided the fisherman had a fine new wife.

The fisherman came home from chopping wood one day, and his wife recognized one particular type of precious wood. She had him find more, which she marketed, and they became wealthy. Then she suggested that her husband take up running, and when he became accomplished, she arranged to have him introduced to the king. When the king's horse ran at full gallop on an outing in the woods, only Mea Yoeng kept up with him. Alone in the forest, the king ate a wonderful meal prepared by Mea Yoeng's virtuous wife. Then on three different occasions, Mea Yoeng saved the life of the king and became his most valued servant.

As for the new wife of the merchant, with her laziness and the careless ways, she squandered away the wealth of the merchant. She had a baby by this chief of the boat. After the baby relieved himself, the virtueless woman wiped him with silk clothes, which she then threw away in the river. In time, all their wealth and the boat were lost, and they came to the home of their former spouses. The virtuous woman recognized them and pointed out that for their greed they now had nothing,

23 Khmer: ស្រីគ្រប់លក្ខណ៍; literally 'woman who has all the qualities'.

while she who was tossed away had transformed a miserable person into a rich man. The couple was greatly ashamed, and left the mansion.

How is the *srey krup leakkh*, the perfect woman presented in this story? She willingly obeys her husband, leaves him without arguing, and lets him take another wife, not thinking of her own rights and needs - acts that show complete submission. However, she is very active, hard-working and entrepreneurial. She knows how to manage her household well, cooks delicious food, washes, cleans and repairs broken things like the basket, and can take good care of babies, all in contrast to the lazy wife. She is generous and thinks of others, as seen in the sharing of fish with her neighbours. Moreover, she is smart and advises and assists her husband in his undertakings, enabling him to become more successful. The story further emphasizes that she is a good steward of the family's possessions.

The virtuous woman represents the perfect role model of a woman. Her behaviour also makes visible the tension and self-contradiction in this female ideal, being completely submissive on the one hand and advising and managing on the other hand. She leaves quietly when her husband sends her away, but shouts to the fisherman's wife, whom she did not know, about the holes in the basket. She should not interfere with her husband's decisions, yet she is the one who guides and facilitates his career. The virtuous woman “was, by definition, the quiet virgin and the screaming wife” (Ledgerwood 1994:127). She was both selfless and devoted to her husband. At the same time that Khmer men are in some ways more highly valued than women, they are also “relatively equal”. These two aspects seem to have always co-existed in the traditional Khmer perception of gender, but they remain paradoxical (:123;127).

Vandy Koan, a French-trained sociologist and editor of a collection of folk tales containing “*Mea yoeng*“, pointed out the emphasis on “the fact that the virtuous woman was educated, and because of this education she was able to help educate (*chuoy áp rŭm*) her husband” (quoted in Ledgerwood 1994:126). She dealt with the basket that needed fixing, she recognized the precious wood and knew how to run a business and how to attend to the king correctly. The Khmer word *aprum* (educate) “is usually used intergenerationally; that is, a teacher educates a student or a parent educates a child. To

use it with reference to a woman seems to place her higher than her husband, whom she is educating” (:126). The term is translated “to enculturate, to bring up (children), to train, education”. So here Koan most likely used it in a wider sense than just passing on knowledge, but also the instillation of values.

The woman in the story has a very important role in shaping her husband's future. If she is intelligent, honest and has a good character, she will be hard-working, caring for her husband and motivated to improve their situation. The virtuous woman is able and trustworthy to manage their resources and provide financial stability. So they can be successful even though he is poor. Likewise, if the wife does not care and wastes their resources, they might become poor even though he may be initially wealthy (:124-125). This idea is also expressed in the Khmer saying “As a seedling supports the soil, so a woman supports a man” (OMF 2005:4). The roots of a seedling hold soil together and when it is pulled out, the soil comes out as well. In the same way, a woman holds the marriage together. It is believed that even if the husband is negligent, as long as the wife works hard, the marriage can still work well, but, if the wife does not perform her role, everything is lost, regardless how good the husband is. On the one hand this acknowledges the important contribution of the woman, on the other hand it also makes her responsible for failure. The influence of women is therefore very important in Cambodian society and hence the importance of educating young women and teaching them good values (Ledgerwood 1994:125).

The husband in “*mea yoeng*” follows his wife's advice; he is hard-working too and so contributes his part to their success. There are also other Khmer folk tales, such as 'The lazy man who had a perfect wife' where it is solely the virtue of the woman that causes the family to prosper. In Buddhist thinking, success is seen as a result of good karma. In “*mea yoeung*” it has been interpreted like this, too. The merits of the woman show in her good behaviour and attitudes and cause the couple to be successful in their present life. The virtue of the woman is even able to affect the karmic status of her husband, a perspective that is different from the common understanding in Southeast Asia (:122).

This folktale has been used to illustrate different points: the importance of women in the social system, that it is necessary for them to have a good education equal to men, but

also that men need to be guided and educated. Furthermore, it seems that the most crucial things for a woman to know are how to manage the household and the family finances well. Proper behaviour and high moral standards of a woman reveal her good karma and both she and her husband can benefit from it in this life and it also has a positive influence on society (:128).

3.6 The 'chbab srey'

The *chbab srey* (a code of conduct for women) was composed in the nineteenth century, apparently by Ang Doung in 1837, but it seems that different versions exist (Jacobsen 2008:119). It is written in the form of a mother instructing her daughter, as a poem like most of the *chbab* and describes the ideal behaviour for girls, listing all her duties in relation to her husband and in the household:

The poem is composed of demand after demand, warning after warning and instruction after instruction of how a woman must submit to the rule of her husband. In the *Cbab Srey*, a mother lovingly instructs her innocent young daughter how to be a perfect wife. She explains the dire consequences if a woman does not live up to the behavior outlined and warns of the qualities of the detestable women (Zimmermann 1994:24).

The *chbab* are believed to reflect the real traditional Khmer ideas, without foreign influence. Cambodians therefore see the behaviour described in it as pure Khmer patterns rather than just rules or recommendations. The desired conduct of a woman as it is outlined in the *chbab srey* is consequently perceived as her traditional gender role, but this view does not take into account the context it was written in, possible tendencies and motivations of the author nor any evidence that might represent a different, more egalitarian aspect of the 'traditional' role of Khmer women (Jacobsen 2008:171).

There is also a code of conduct for boys, the *chbab proh*, but it is less known and given less attention than the *chbab srey*, which has, in a revised form, been used in the Cambodian schools in the twentieth century as part of the curriculum (Smith 1999:99).

The *chbab srey* advises the Khmer women to always respect their husband and serve them well. Whatever he does, a good wife shall not get angry at him nor say something

bad, but be patient and forgive him.

“Even though your husband curse, you go to sleep and consider
And you come back with gentle words and solve that problem” (Mai [s a]:3).

So she not only has to just accept it, but it is also the woman's responsibility to restore harmony by solving the problem. She has to create a good, peaceful atmosphere in the house, no matter how she is treated. Even if a violent husband “hits you in anger and treats you like a thief or a prostitute, you must not dare to respond for fear of inciting further his anger” (Zimmermann 1994:26).

According to the *chbab srey* the woman always has to serve her husband and submit to his will:

Follow the commands of the husband like a slave; dread your husband's heart for fear of otherwise being insulted or beaten; cook well and never dare to eat until your husband returns home; suppress your emotions to avoid the risk of having your husband insult you; even if your husband has a terrible temper, you must never dare to reply (:26).

The woman is further “instructed not to be offended or upset if their husbands find another wife, lover or 'female servant'. It is better to 'remain silent than to argue and break apart, otherwise he might not return” (:25). The man can do anything, but even the slightest fault of the woman is not tolerated. This is also reflected in a Cambodian proverb: “Men are like pure gold, women like white cloth”. If a white cloth is dropped in the mud, one can never get it totally clean any more, as stains will remain, whereas gold can be cleaned again and it will look as nice and shiny as before. So a woman's wrongdoings are much more serious than those of a man. They can spoil her reputation for ever and especially in rural areas in Cambodia, this means ruining her whole life, because people will know quickly enough.

The woman is instructed to work hard and not be lazy. She has to be able to run her household well, to cook, clean and serve guests. Apart from her household chores, she “should try to do the work like weaving or knitting” (Mai s a:2). While working hard, women also have to be quiet and practically go unnoticed: “Women are to walk slowly and softly, be so quiet in their movements that one cannot hear the sound of their silk skirt rustling” (Ledgerwood 1992:5). Her appearance has to be shy and modest when attending guests or meeting her parents in-law.

The essence of the *chbab srey* is still deeply ingrained in Cambodian thinking and influences women's actions and behaviours, consciously or unconsciously. It has been passed down from generation to generation, mothers teaching their daughters, but has also been used in the primary school curriculum. The fact that it is believed to represent traditional Khmer thinking gives it even more weight, because not following it would mean abandoning traditional cultural values. This has a big impact on women's lives and actions:

Women who believe that they always have to please their husband will feel guilty and make themselves responsible when this is not the case. This shows for example in the number of women who think it is acceptable for a husband to beat his wife for various reasons. According to the *Cambodia: Demographic and Health Survey 2010* (Cambodia 2011:207) more than thirteen percent of the women surveyed accept that burning the food is a legitimate reason for a husband to beat his wife, to name just one example. Forty-six percent of the women think that at least one of the reasons mentioned²⁴ justifies a husband to beat his wife. Urban woman with high education were least likely to agree, whereas poor, uneducated women in rural areas show the highest agreement. Men are generally less likely to believe that a reason is legitimate (:206-208). It is therefore the women themselves who agree that they deserve punishment.

Domestic violence is highly prevalent in Cambodia, but many women suffer silently and remain loyal to their husbands because this is what they were taught. They might even perceive it as their own fault. Often violence is not reported by the women because they “face shame and dishonour in seeking outside help for domestic problems” (JICA 2007:43) and it might be perceived as betrayal of the family. Many initiatives by the government and non-government organizations attempt to address this problem and awareness is rising, but these deeply rooted ideals of the *chbab srey* impede full success. Attitudes that consider that the woman always has to submit to the husband remain an obstacle to “achieving gender equality in all aspects of social, economic and political life” (MoWA 2008:2). Discrimination of women is validated through the *chbab srey* and it hinders the women from enjoying their human rights (:6).

²⁴ The reasons include: burning the food, arguing with the husband, going out without telling him, neglecting the children, refusing to have sexual intercourse with him and asking him to use a condom.

It seems that the *chbab srey*, though written nearly two hundred years ago, is still influencing women's thinking and has significant consequences for the implementation of the women's rights and gender equality. Furthermore, it impedes the fight against gender-based violence. The most affected ones are women in rural areas with low education. If there is no change of mindset, these women, submitting to the 'traditional cultural ideal', will have denied themselves their rights.

Apart from the social norms defining the role and status of women in Cambodian society, religious beliefs are also influencing it. Some connections between belief and social structure have already been touched briefly in this chapter, the belief system will be subject of discussion in the next.

4. BELIEF SYSTEM

Buddhism has been the official state religion in Cambodia since the thirteenth century, except during the time of Democratic Kampuchea, when all religions were banned. Over 94% of Khmer people are Buddhists (CRN 2007:30). However, this is not pure Theravada Buddhism, but rather Folk Buddhism, a mix of animist practices and beliefs. The way it is lived out, shows a mixture of elements from different religions (:xiv).

A great fear of spirits affects the lives of many Khmer people, who feel they constantly have to try to please them. The 'Indianization' in the Pre-Angkorean time also influenced the religious life. During that time there was an increasing syncretism of animism and Hinduism, with the Hindu gods taking over more and more of the sites of the local spirits (Golzio 2011:56). However, indigenous beliefs remained. Golzio (:57-58) argues that the religious practices of the Khmer are not just Hindu or Buddhist, but that the Hindu form is often a facade for their original folk religion. Similarly, Ebihara (1968:363) describes the religious life in the village in the 1960s “as a blend of elements not only from Buddhism but also from Hinduism and the traditional, indigenous folk religion as well”. Although the religious practices derived from different religious traditions, it is perceived by many as one system: “for the ordinary Khmer, Buddha and ghosts, prayers at the temple and invocations to spirits, monks and mediums are all part of what is essentially a single religious system, different aspects of which are called into play at different, appropriate times” (:364). Since the ancient times the Khmer have always been searching for harmony between these different religious influences, first between animistic practices and the contributions of Indian spirituality and philosophy, and then, when Theravada Buddhism was introduced, it was added to that system: “While preserving the elements of its Brahmanic inheritance, Theravada succeeded in inculcating a strong preoccupation with moral and spiritual matters even among the most common strata of the society” (Choulean 1988:36).

In this chapter I will describe the different belief systems of the Khmer people and examine their impact on the social structures and daily life. As the focus of this study is on women's influence on forming religious identity, it is fundamental to understand the

religious background of the Khmer. In order to communicate the gospel effectively, it needs to speak into their situation, otherwise it will not be relevant for them. Many religious practices and traditional beliefs are tightly woven into Cambodian culture, making it difficult to discern their origin and even more difficult to change once someone becomes a Christian and realises that a specific practice is not compatible with his new belief.

There is also a minority group of Muslim people living in Cambodia: the Cham. I won't touch on their belief system here, as my focus are the Khmer people and there is not much interconnection between these two people groups. The Cham are mainly Muslim and live in their own communities.

There are many Khmer words used for different spirits and spiritual practices, that don't have a corresponding word in English that captures their meaning, therefore transliterations are used. Yet there are various ways to transliterate and therefore the same word might be written quite differently by different authors, which can be confusing for the reader. For clarification I will use footnotes to indicate the connections.

4.1 *Traditional belief system*

Supernatural forces are very real and play an important role in the lives of most Cambodians. They influence their decisions and behaviour and can be seen as their 'real religion':

There is a sense in which this religion of local, immanent powers in the environment was and is the real religion of the Khmers. It plays a part in the villager's hopes and fears that is much more lively than the myths and rituals of imported Hinduism, or even of the much more popular Buddhism with which the Khmers identify themselves in modern times (Mabbett & Chandler 1995:111).

The invisible powers are very real, especially, but not only, for the rural Khmer and play a vital part in their lives. There are many traditions and myths concerning spirits and magic forces, which help them deal with these powers (:108). A fear of spirits is omnipresent. No Khmer, for example, would ever be completely without fear if alone in

a dark forest, though the forest was originally their natural environment. This is not just because of the possible physical dangers such as wild animals and the like, but even more so because of the invisible threats. Buddhist monks are not exempt from these fears:

The invisible being that dwell in the wild inspire dread, even in those who might be expected not to care: there is no greater challenge to the cultivated serenity of a Buddhist monk than the requirement that he should spend a period of solitary meditation, alone in the wild woodland, watched from all around by the unseen spirits (:108).

There are different kinds of spirits; the following description is not exhaustive, but just includes the most important ones as they are found in the references.

Neak Ta

Similar to other Southeast Asian countries, a network of guardian spirits protect rural Cambodia. They are called *neak ta*²⁵ and are often associated with specific locations like a tree, a hill or a pond, where they take residence. They “became symbolic ancestors of people in a particular place, or by dying in a place they came to patronize its soil” (Chandler 1996a:19). Chandler (:19) distinguishes two different kinds of *neak ta*: the “*Nak ta* in inhabited sites could be spoken to and tamed; [whereas] those in the forest or abandoned places were thought to be more powerful and more malignant.” Because of the influence they have, Yoshiaki Ishizawa described them as “the divinities of the very life of the peasants” (cited in Mabbett & Chandler 1995:111). They are more tangible than the rather abstract truths of Buddhism or Hinduism and therefore impact people in their daily life and “have important and complementary functions at the level of popular ritual” (Harris 2005:52).

The *neak ta* of a village is considered “its founding and guardian god” (Bowers 2003:49-51) and has power over the land and water, being able to protect or harm, make the soil fertile and protect the crops or cause the harvest to be destroyed. Therefore people try to appease the *neak ta* by burning incense or candles or offer different kinds

25 The Khmer word *neak* (អ្នក) is generally used for a person in compound words, also meaning you, used for both sexes. *Ta* (តា) means grandfather and is also used to refer to ancestors. Transliterated it is found as *neak ta* but also as *nak ta*.

of food like bananas, a chicken, etc. (:49-51). The *neak ta* are the only spirits that are represented materially, often symbolised by simple images of stone or wood as an expression of the wild nature they belong to, but sometimes also as human figures. The spirit usually dwells in a tree and its power is concentrated in a stone that is taken from near the trunk of that tree and placed in a small shrine (*khtom*) on a post, which faces the tree (Mabbett & Chandler 1995:108).

Ancestral Spirits

Spirits that are most feared by many Cambodians are those of the ancestors, known as *meba*²⁶ (Jacobsen 2008:6; Harris 2005:58-59). They oversee the behaviour of their descendants and act as their guardians. The descendants, in return, “need to rehabilitate those ancestors about whom they are unsure” (Holt 2012:17), as it is believed that people who die with bad karma have to suffer for their sins in purgatory. There is therefore a “moral dependence” upon each other, between the living and their deceased ancestors. The rituals of *Pchum Ben* (Ancestors' day), which will be discussed in 4.4, are very important for the ancestors who are suffering, as good karma can be transferred to them and help ease their suffering.

Other Spirits and supernatural forces

There are various kinds of other spirits²⁷. What the Cambodians call *kmauit* are different kinds of ghosts, including the spirit of a dead person, especially the spirits of people

26 *Me* (មី) is the Khmer word commonly used for chief, leader, supervisor, and also means mother.

27 There are several words for 'spirit' in Khmer. Here those mentioned in the text, as they are translated in the Khmer-English dictionary (Chanbo 2014):

វិញ្ញាណ *vinhean*: sense, feeling spirit, mind (the world used for the Holy Spirit).

ខ្មោច *kmauit*: spirit of the dead; ghost, dead body, the late.

អ្នកតា *neak ta*: tutelary spirit; spirit, genie (usually benevolent), ancestral spirit, term of address to a male spirit, guardian spirit.

ព្រាស់ *priey*: ghost, phantom, spirit believed to cause illnesses.

ព្រលឹង *praling*: soul, life, consciousness, intellect, goodwill, health, prosperity.

អារក្ខ *arak*: ghost, spirit, demon. The word also means care, protection, caring, protecting, guarding, administrating, governing, assistance. រូប អារក្ខ (literally: 'image of the *arak*') is used for a female medium.

who died through violence or accident and no proper ceremony was performed for them. They “are a source of very real and constant fear to the villagers. Even husky, courageous men dread to walk alone at night because of the possibility of encountering a ghost” (Ebihara 1968:429). Some people from the countryside even stay home at night out of fear of evil spirits, while some “always offer them a portion of food before eating” (Bowers 2003:55).

Among the *kmauit* that are strongly feared and most dangerous are the *priey* or *bray*²⁸, “spirits of women who died in childbirth or spirits of virgins” (Choulean 1988:37). They are very malicious. Choulean explains: “Because of their tragic death, they are the bearers of extreme impurity. Impurity is the source of great danger, but at the same time it generates formidable magical energy”. This magic power is why the people, on the one hand ward them off out of fear, but on the other hand, try to get the cooperation of the *priey* when performing magical rites. Though they are basically malevolent, people might also make use of their magical powers. The *priey* often live in a special kind of tree, but may also wander in nature or roam in the village and can turn into balls of fire emitting sparks. The procedure to exorcise these *priey* “involves setting light to specially made firebrands and beating them with sticks, thus imitating in a ritual action the process which is to be projected into the world of the spirits” (Mabbett & Chandler 1995:118). This practice reflects the principle of “mimesis” as it is found in cosmological thinking. It is believed that by imitating the structure of the invisible world, actions done in the visible world can influence the invisible.

The *arak* are another kind of spirit, which can be both benign or malicious. They “speak through a female medium (*rup arak*) during possession ceremonies (*cuen arak*) [...]. A *rup arak* has no training but is regarded as a woman with particularly good character and a natural tendency to fall into trance” (Ebihara 1968, 428).

Earth spirits play an important role for the construction of a new house, because “the *naga* (serpent) spirits often figure as guardians and owners of the soil. One ancient Khmer belief held that all the land belonged to the subterranean serpent demon”

28 The Khmer word is ជ្រៃ, transliterated it is found both as *priey* and as *bray* / *brai*.

(Mabbett & Chandler 1995:108). Therefore people have to be extremely attentive to these spirits when building a house, as “Krun Bali, the *naga* spirit, owns all the land, and before construction begins an official, *acar*, must be employed to divine the disposition of the *naga*'s body, invisible beneath the earth, so that a house may be properly sited and an auspicious date found for the beginning of building” (:134).

The human body is thought to mirror the external world and is also a locus for spirits or souls (*praling*) (Harris 2005:59). Ang Choulean (2004:2) explains that, according to Khmer beliefs, there are nineteen *praling* living in a person, giving life to him or her. If anything unusual happens, which can be a very minor event like “accidentally slip[ping] on the stairs”, this can cause some *praling* to leave, which in turn causes illness. There are no specific symptoms, but the person feels weak and exhausted and medicine doesn't help. This might happen when the “spirits of the forest lure some of the *pralung* out of the body and into the forest by conjuring up false and seductive images of their domain which is, in reality, wild and harsh” (:2). When the *praling* have left, they must be called back by family and friends, which is not easy. It is not only “a vocal exercise but also involves various gestures and performances”. Because it happens so easily that a *braling* leaves the body, people often perform a ceremony called “*hau pralung* (calling the *pralung*)” when there is an important event, “for fear that some of the *pralung* may have left the person”.

Women and spiritual forces

There are special implications for women with regards to the spirit world, because blood in general and especially post-partum blood “was considered potentially dangerous as it could attract malevolent supernatural forces” (Jacobsen 2008:139). Therefore, when a woman at the palace had delivered a baby or had a miscarriage, a special ceremony, called “*sampuor polikar*” (:140) had to be performed in order to purify the place, which included special sacrifices for the local *neak ta*. Under the raised bed where a mother and her newborn baby rest, a fire is made in order to protect them from evil spirits by 'smoking' them. It is believed that a “*brai krala plerng*, 'ghost of the fire-chamber'”, which is the spirit of “a woman who had died in childbirth”, would try

“to kill the new mother and take her baby. Women who died in the third trimester of pregnancy or in labour without having given birth were said to have been killed by *brai* and could become *brai* themselves” (:140). In the same way the spirits of young women who died as virgins, the *brai kramom*, could become potentially evil, especially against their living counterparts.

Spirits are often represented in different areas according to their gender: “feminine spirits and child spirits [are found] in the forests and in private homes, with generally masculine spirits such as *neak tas* marking places of habitation” (Davis 2008:135). This seems especially remarkable as the forest represents uncontrolled “places of death and wilderness”.

4.2 Hinduism

With 'Indianization' beginning from the early Christian era, Hinduism came to Cambodia. Hindu gods were taken over by the elite as they wanted to establish genealogical ties with the Sanskrit culture (Golzio 2007:4). There was an increasing syncretism of Hinduism and Animism during the pre-Angkorean period, when Hindu gods took over more and more of the sites where the local spirits were dwelling, like hills, rocks, etc. (Golzio 2011:56). Ichita (2007:25-26) argues that one of the main reasons that the Indian religious culture has been incorporated quite quickly in Cambodia are the similarities between their traditional beliefs; mountains are regarded as god, and Siva is characterized as “spirit of the mountains”. In addition to that, the influence of the Pala empire of classical India brought a “Hindu-Buddhist syncretism” to Cambodia, as it was found in Bengal at that time (Harris 2005:11). There is also “a poetical account of the religion of Funan by a Buddhist monk”, which indicates the presence of both Brahmanism and Buddhism in Funan. Even though the monk “emphasizes that 'the custom of this country was to worship the god Mahesvara (Siva)' he uses a number of technical terms when speaking of Buddhism [...] which strongly suggest a Mahayana presence” (:5-6). By the beginning of the Angkorean period there was complete syncretism between the local belief systems and those introduced from India, based on the idea that the local spirits and the Hindu gods had joined together to

protect the world where people lived (Ichita 2007:25;30).

Inscriptions and carvings on the temples indicate that Hinduism was the main religion during most of the Angkorean empire until the thirteenth century, when many Khmer converted to Buddhism. As mentioned above, most of the Angkorean kings were Shaivites, but accepting and integrating elements of Vishnuism and Buddhism. During the Angkorean time the balance between local religions and those imported from India changed, so that animistic beliefs started strengthening the values of Hinduism. There are temples built for all three major Hindu gods, for example, Phnom Bok is a temple built by Yasovarman I on a hill in the north-eastern part of Angkor, which contains three sanctuaries in an enclosed place (Golzio 2011:69). Phnom Krom, another comparable temple built around the same time, was where Shiva, Vishnu and Brahma, the three main gods of Hinduism, were worshipped. As sculptures of the three gods had also been found at Phnom Bok, it is safe to assume that the three sanctuaries were dedicated to these three Hindu gods (:69-70). Most of the temples at Angkor were Hindu, though some were at least partly Buddhist, such as the Bayon. The Hindu influence is also evident in the cosmological principle of mimesis. Temples like Angkor Wat are constructed as a representation of the invisible world.

The various capitals of the Angkorian kings may be read symbolically as miniature images of the universe. The rivers and *barays* represented the cosmic ocean; the enclosing walls, the iron-mountain chain (*cakravala*) at the limit of the world's golden disk; and the temples, the central world mountain, Mount Meru (Harris 2005:19).

Contemporary views about the significance of the temples of Angkor also reinforce this world view, as shown in the following tale:

A legend current in recent times integrates the architecture of Angkor into a widely shared perception of the universe. It tells of Preah Ket Malea, son of the god Indra by a human wife. This prince, as a boy was taken up to heaven by his father and given a guided tour of the glittering palaces of the celestial realm. When he had seen them all, Indra told him that he was to be given the kingdom of Cambodia, and he could choose any building he had seen as the model for a monument which the divine architect would reproduce for him in his earthly kingdom. Amazed, he hesitated to answer, unwilling to set himself up alongside the gods by appropriating the design of a heavenly palace. But then he declared that he would choose the least grand of all the buildings in Indra's royal precinct, the heavenly stables (Mabbett & Chandler 1995:119).

Angkor Wat, the most famous of the Angkorean temples, which is also represented

on the Cambodian flag, was built as “an exact duplicate” (:119) of these stables.

The influence of Hinduism on the belief system of modern Cambodia is perceived differently by different scholars. Ebihara (1968:363) holds the view that there is little influence: “Hinduism, once dominant in some of the ancient kingdoms (but perhaps never fully understood and accepted by the masses) survives only as discrete elements of ceremonials, symbolism, and cosmology”²⁹. Mabbett (Mabbett & Chandler 1995:118), however, points out that the Hindu cults and rituals, as they were promoted during most of the Angkorean period, still live on in the beliefs in the spirits. They were part of “a single religious universe with the whole pantheon of local spirits. These spirit beliefs are wholly continuous with those that can be observed among Khmers of modern times”. This view, that there are still many Hindu elements found in the religious practices, is shared by Golzio (2011:167). He attributes that to the fact that Brahmans have always been represented in important political institutions. Nowadays this Hindu influence is integrated into a Buddhist system, or rather folk-Buddhism.

4.3 Buddhism

Though Buddhism became the dominant religion in Cambodia only towards the end of the Angkor empire, there is evidence for its presence already in the pre-Angkorean period: “around forty carved Buddha images from the Mekong Delta region and from areas of Thailand associated with Funan have been found in a variety of materials, including stone, wood, glass, clay, bone, and metal” (Harris 2005:4). This is reinforced in the “*History of the Sui Dynasty*, [which] also confirms the existence of Buddhist monks and nuns in Zhenla” (:9).

Buddhist inscriptions give evidence of a heyday for Mahayana Buddhism in the tenth century and provide details about its values and teachings and to some extent about monastic life. Hindu influence is clearly visible and some ideas have been aligned with Shivaism (Golzio 2011:76). In the late Angkor period and immediately after, Theravada

²⁹ As examples of Hindu elements that still remain in the religious beliefs and practices of the Khmer Ebihara (:363) names “belief in certain minor deities (*tivoda*) derived from Hindu gods and goddesses, the use of the white cotton thread in ceremonies, the naga (Khmer: *niék*) symbol, etc.”.

Buddhism gained influence and became increasingly popular. Despite that, this did not bring much changes to the religious practices, according to Mabbett (Mabbett & Chandler 1995:116), neither for the rural population, nor for the monks and priests. They kept “their ancestral culture of local spirits”, making it “cohere with the religious culture they knew”. There was, however, a positive social influence of Theravada Buddhism, which helped to order relationships and bring harmony between people of different ages, gender and social status. “Implicitly the Buddhist order stood for a social stability secure from excessive interference by the magic powers of spirits” (:113-114). With regard to social rank there was hardly any improvement possible for people of the lower classes because of the karma theory of Theravada Buddhism, which sees social status as a result of merits accumulated in previous lives (Harris 2005:27).

Buddhism prospered in the sixteenth century, as can be seen in the big monasteries and is also confirmed in reports of Europeans who had settled at Longvek at that time (Mabbett & Chandler 1995:35). But alongside Buddhism as the dominating religion, the veneration of tutelary and guardian spirits, including former Hindu gods, continued (Golzio 2011:151). In spite of the influence from Vietnam and Thailand on Cambodia after the fall of Angkor, Theravada Buddhism continued relatively steady for several hundred years. In 1939 the *Institut bouddhique* was established in order to restrain the influence of the Thai on Cambodian Buddhism (:168-169). In the early 1970s, before the Khmer Rouge regime, Buddhism still flourished in Cambodia. However, Barnabas Mam (2012:61) argues that there were already first signs of dwindling importance: “Everyone was just too comfortable in the rituals. The communists accused the monks of parasitism, of living off of the labour of others. This accusation contained enough truth for those who were poor or oppressed to begin blaming the monks”.

Two influential leaders of the Khmer Rouge, Saloth Sar (known as Pol Pot) and Ta Mok, had Buddhist backgrounds and spent at least some time in a monastery (Harris 2005:160-161). Harris (:229) points out some ideological connection:

“the Buddhist-inspired nationalist movement of earlier decades had been a fertile seedbed for the germination of Khmer communism. Only once the movement had grown and developed did some of its leading members seek to break their links with the past by shedding all prior connections”.

This explains the fervent reaction against religion and the elimination of institutional

Buddhism during the communist regime. “Yet”, Harris continues, “even at the height of the Democratic Kampuchea period, subliminal Buddhist influences remained and affected Khmer Rouge behavior and ideology.”

After those dark years organized Buddhism re-emerged slowly. Many of the educated monks had lost their lives under the Khmer Rouge and the new government, supported by the Vietnamese, put restrictions on its institutional growth. But it still managed to find a way to avoid the worst restrictions from the government and once the Vietnamese withdrew towards the end of the eighties, it could recover some of its previous structure and functions and even more so, at the beginning of the nineties, in the run-up to the elections in 1993 (Harris 2005:223).

Though Buddhism is the official religion in Cambodia and about ninety percent of the population is Buddhist, it is not a pure form of Buddhism, but mixed with elements of other religions such as Hinduism, and in daily life traditional beliefs are omnipresent. Those help them deal with questions of daily life, as the spirits are influencing their well-being, success etc., whereas Buddhism deals with questions about the ultimate origin and destiny.

Buddhism can explain transcendental questions such as one's general existence in this life and the next. But the folk religion can give reasons for and means of coping with the more immediate and incidental, yet nonetheless pressing, problems and fortunes of one's present existence. The accumulation of Buddhist merit may enable a better rebirth in the next life, but in the meantime there may be problems such as drought, illness, or unrequited love in this life that need attention, and worry can be relieved by recourse to the folk religion” (Ebihara 1968:442).

Buddhist practices

Buddhist practices focus on merit, with the aim for a better rebirth in the next life. But one can also get rewarded in the present life, materially or by an increase in status, as is expressed in the Cambodian saying 'if you do good, you will receive good, if you do bad things, you will receive bad things'³⁰. Acts of demerit (*baab*, which is the Khmer word used for sin) need to be avoided. These include the actions proscribed in the five precepts as cited in Keyes (1995:117-118):

30 In Khmer: ធ្វើបុណ្យបានបុណ្យ ធ្វើបាបបានបាប (*twer bon ban bon, twer baab ban baab*).

I undertake the precept to abstain from taking life.
I undertake the precept to abstain from taking what is not given.
I undertake the precept to abstain from improper sexual acts.
I undertake the precept to abstain from telling lies.
I undertake the precept to abstain from imbibing or ingesting substances which cause heedlessness.

A good Buddhist should also avoid the three cardinal vices, which are greed, anger and delusion, and act according to their positive inversion in order to make merit: “Instead of being greedy, one should be compassionate, charitable and merciful (Pali *mettā* and *karunā*); instead of being angry and aggressive, one should maintain equanimity (*upekkhā*). And instead of being deluded, one should seek wisdom (*paññā*)” (:118).

Judy Ledgerwood (2008) compared the Buddhist practices before and after the Khmer Rouge regime based on the findings of Ebihara May from the 1960s and research done in 2003. The main practices through which one can make merit described by Ebihara (cited in Ledgerwood 2008:148) include being ordained as a monk, following the Buddhist precepts, giving to the monks and the temple and keeping the *thngai sel*, the 'holy days' that are observed about every two weeks. Whereas many practices remained much the same, changes that have been noticed include a decline in morality and discipline among the young monks and they also seem to have less knowledge about the *dhamma* and *vinaya* (:160).

Ebihara observed that people followed the moral principles to different degrees. The command against killing was seen as very important. She gives the example “of a villager who killed someone during the Issarak period and was subsequently ostracized and barred from the village” (:152). Today, with a recent history of several decades of war, there are likely to be many people who have violated this precept as former soldiers. But where it is related to killing of animals like chicken or pigs for food people seem to be more relaxed and do not mind raising animals for their meat (:152).

It is mainly elderly people who go to temples on the *thngai sel* (holy days). Grandmothers would often bring small children along:

One elderly nun said that her children had come to know how to soat (chant) the requests for the precepts almost as early as they could talk. She said that taking her grandchildren to som sel was a means of teaching them right from wrong: 'If they were afraid/respectful (khlaic) because of the meaning of the dhamma, then they would know that to kill someone was a sin, to steal something from others was a

sin, and thus they would not dare to do so' (:155).

Many younger people would rather give alms than attend these regular ceremonies at the temple, though for the annual festivals nearly all people would attend. Offering was still a key practice for making merit according to Ledgerwood's findings. Apart from the merit that can be accumulated for the next life, giving has also positive consequences in this life as other people will like and respect those who give and they get a good reputation. When the monks walk through the village in the mornings, stopping at different houses and waiting for the people to offer food for their meal, it is generally the women who come out to fill their bowls and the majority of them are older people above 50 years of age (:156).

Monks who are able to get higher education have access to modern technology like computers, mobile phones, learn English and may even be able to travel abroad - which seems a bit ironic, as Ledgerwood (:152) comments, taking into account their vows of poverty.

The Buddhist Temple (Wat³¹)

Most villages have their own temple, or one that is located nearby. The temple grounds not only serve religious and moral education purposes, but also have a social function as community centre and often a school is included in the compound (Ebihara 1968:382).

The temple grounds consist of different buildings surrounded by a wall with several entrances. The main temple (*vihie*), forms the centre of the temple grounds. It is a stone or cement building with its entrance facing east and it accommodates Buddha statues on an altar. Then there are one or more buildings (*sala*) which are used for different purposes. The monks eat under these roofed sheds. It is a place where visitors can be received and where they can stay overnight. The sheds also serve as classrooms. In addition, a big part of the ceremonies are performed in the *sala*. Then there are the houses where the monks sleep, a place to bathe, often a kitchen shed and there might also be “a school building, small thatch shelters for persons who come to serve the

31 Khmer: វត្ត; 'Buddhist monastery'. Wat is the Khmer term generally used for the temple grounds. In English, monastery and temple are therefore used interchangeably.

monks or to meditate, monuments that hold the ashes of the dead or honor some important deceased personage, and some shrines for animistic folk spirits” (Ebihara 1968:365-366). These shrines include a hut for the *neak ta* on the temple compound, often in the north-east. This is for the *neak ta* of the Wat, as Choulean (1988:36-37) points out, which is not the same as the tutelary spirit of the whole village. Its authority is limited to the temple grounds, where it guards good Buddhist practice and proper behaviour inside the compound. This means that the *neak ta*, an animistic spirit, is present in the Buddhist temple grounds, as a parallel to the way it is in the village. Not only the *neak ta*, but also other spirits are adapted into Buddhist life on the temple grounds, like the *bray*. Two examples of its presence are described by Choulean (:37-38): Firstly, many wats possess a pirogue which is stored on its grounds and used for the annual boat races. In order to win the races they appeal to the *bray* with its magic power. The *bray* inhabits this boat and is “assigned the function of a guardian, and she is 'nourished' regularly by the monks, often even by the abbot”. However, she still does sometimes reveal her malicious nature, too. The second example talks about the *bray* even being sheltered in the *vihie* as a guardian:

She dwells generally in the pedestal of the main statue of the temple. Nobody may profane the sacred edifice in any way whatsoever under the penalty of being immediately punished by its guardian. Thus the *bray* changes from an eminently malevolent spirit into a guardian of correct Buddhist cult. Thus occurs a formidable act of syncretism between ancestral animism of the Khmers and Buddhism. To merit and assume this respectable function as a protectress of the sanctuary, the *bray* must totally change her behavior. She is no more motivated by wickedness. Henceforth her actions are dictated by a steadfast obsession to enforce respect for Buddha's religion. All the same, her original personality is not completely effaced (:37-38).

These examples illustrate that the integration of spirit beliefs into Buddhist practices do not exclude the temple grounds, nor even the *vihie*, the sacred place, itself.

People living on the temple grounds are the monks, temple boys and people who come to live there for a short or a longer time: “Usually there are several adult laymen living at the temple. Generally elderly men and women, they come to reside at the temple for periods ranging from several days to several months to earn merit by performing various chores for the monks, as well as by prayer and meditation” (Ebihara 1968:370). Many families send their sons in their early teens to the temple for some months to gain

merit. When teenage boys became novices, “it was said to be in honour of their mothers; when they ordained as *bhikku* at the age twenty they did so in honour of their fathers” (Jacobsen 2008:196).

The *achaa* does not live at the temple, but he is an important person in the ceremonies that take place there. He is “a layman who acts as liaison between the monks and the laity, the religious and secular worlds” (Ebihara 1968:371). To select the *achaa*, the head monk consults with different people of the congregation to find the men who are favoured and respected in the community. The appointment then needs the formal confirmation of the local and provincial authorities. The *achaa* is mainly responsible for leading and organizing ceremonies and festivals at the temple, the management of the temple grounds and he acts as a link-person between the temple and the monks on one side and the lay people on the other (:371-372; Harris 2005:77). Furthermore he collects the contributions from the people and keeps all the accounts.

Buddhism and education

Traditionally one function of the pagoda has been education. This was already the case in the pre-Angkorean time: “Various monastic institutions founded by the kings of Funan were seats of learning and places for the education of the young” (Kalab 1976:161). The need for school materials like chalk and ink are mentioned in inscriptions. As nearly every boy became a novice for a period of time at some stage before he got married, they all learned to read, but not necessarily to write, because a monk needed to be able to read sermons and Buddhist texts. The women were illiterate (:161). This was different for the women at the palace during the Angkorean time. They were much more privileged: “Elite women seem to have received religious and literary education, as some inscriptions refer to gifts given to the *guru* of a queen or princess. Two queens acted as religious instructors themselves” (Jacobsen 2008:62).

In the nineteenth century, education was still strongly influenced by Buddhism. Most intellectuals were or had been monks, which shaped the different subjects: “Khmer literature, arts and architecture were religious; history, in its chronicular form, was the history of the relationships between kings, the *sangha*, and the *sasana* (religion)” (Hansen 2004:52). Poetic texts implied moral and social norms and values to

indoctrinate the students (:43). When Thailand modernized their education system towards the end of the nineteenth century under King Chulalongkorn, they continued to use the pagoda schools, but trained increasingly more teachers, both laymen and monks. In the Cambodian provinces that were under Thai control, this system was introduced, too. Once the Battambang and Siem Reap were returned to Cambodia in 1908, the people wanted to continue with the modernized system at the pagoda schools and the French adopted it. But later, when there were more and more secular primary schools and education became compulsory, the influence of the *sangha* decreased significantly (Kalab 1976:161-162). The literacy rate started improving constantly during that time. Because of the opportunity to get a secular education, the number of boys who became novices declined significantly to a low point by 1960. When the monastic certificates were recognized in 1963, there was a turn in this development and the number of novices increased again (:164). For the children in the rural areas and especially the poor, the situation was a bit different as they did not always have access to these improvements. Even though the schools were theoretically free, poor boys could hardly get higher education. It would have required them to live away from home and having to pay for board, books and uniforms. Moreover, as the schools were new, the students had to make a contribution towards the cost of the construction and “some teachers demanded bribes” (:164). The boys could still become ordained novices and would receive education at the pagoda, but that was no option for the girls. Ledgerwood (2008:150) found a similar situation in her research from 2003: mostly poor young men from the rural areas sought ordination in order to get an education because the state schools were too expensive for them.

At the end of the 1980s and in the 1990s, Buddhist schools were re-opened and the number has grown significantly since. They include all three levels: there are Buddhist primary schools all over the country, a big number of secondary schools also in different provinces and the Preah Sihanouk Raja Buddhist University (SBU) in the capital Phnom Penh. However, Buddhist schools at all levels face a lot of problems such as lack of funds and materials, which negatively affect the quality of education (Khy 2008:268-269).

Monks and their female counterparts

The account of Chou Ta-kuan, a Chinese envoy who stayed in Cambodia from 1296 to 1297, provides the most detailed information that exists about everyday life of that period and also the first detailed evidence of the Buddhist persuasion. He describes the monks, their habits and their appearance (yellow robes, shaved heads, barefooted movements, etc). They seemed to be very respected and would even be consulted by the king on important matters. According to his records there were no nuns (Mabbett & Chandler 1995:116). Nevertheless, in the royal family at that time not only Jayavarman VII, but also other people, including women, were strongly attracted to the Buddhist teachings. There are even examples of women involved in teaching Buddhism, including one of the king's wives:

Indradevi, was an important Buddhist patroness, described as having 'surpassed in her knowledge the knowledge of philosophers.' Her almost faultless Sanskrit inscription at Phimeanakas [...] tells how she taught Buddhism to nuns at three named convents: Nagendratunga, Tilakottara, and Narendrasrama. She also converted the king's first wife, Jayarajadevi, who is said to have organized dramatic enactments of stories of the Buddha's previous lives (Jatakas), performed by young nuns recruited from outcast families. How large the nuns' order was at this time is impossible to say, but the involvement of two principal wives of such a powerful king must have had a beneficial impact (Harris 2005:23).

Regarding the existence of nuns, different opinions are represented in the resources. According to Guthrie (2004:133), “ordained nuns (*bhikkhuni*), the female equivalent of the male Buddhist monk (*bhikkhu*), disappeared from Theravada Buddhism many centuries ago”. If that is the case, there must have been ordained nuns at some stage in history, but they lost their significance in the Buddhist system. Guthrie continues:

Today there are no *bhikkhuni* for scholars to focus on; there are only Buddhist laywomen (*upasika*) and an intermediate category of female ascetics called *yay ji* or *tun ji*. The stars of Cambodian Buddhism are the Buddhist monks. Highly visible in their bright orange robes, these monks are objects of pious veneration by Cambodians who shower them with food and clothing and build them lavish temples. Women are confined to the periphery of this religious system due to their gender; not only are they barred from ordination as *bhikkhuni*, but orthodox Theravada Buddhism also teaches that in order to reach *nibbana*, women must first be reborn as men.

The *tun ji* are described by Martini (quoted in Ebihara 1968:370) as some kind of a female counterpart to the monks, who “shave their heads, dress in white, lead a devout and ascetic life comparable to that of the monks, and render various services to the

monks and the temple”, although he also states that there are no nuns in Cambodian Buddhism. However, the fact that there were no nuns, does not mean that women were not actively involved. They continued to generously and enthusiastically support Theravada Buddhism. Jacobsen (2008:196) points to their “active presence in Buddhism”, although they could not be ordained. The *tun ji* were allowed to study Buddhist texts and meditate. She describes the example of Pao Chin, who “became a *daun chi* in 1960 rather than marry again after the death of her husband. She studied *dhamma* and *vipassana* with a learned teacher and learned Pali to the highest level.” Though it was possible for women to meditate and receive high education, not all did so. Some were involved in practical tasks at the temple like cooking and cleaning for the monks.

The use of the word *puos*, as it is discussed by Guthrie (2004:146-147), gives some further insight on the changed role of women at the temple. The word “first appeared in pre-Angkor-period inscriptions describing the ordination of female temple attendants and only much later became identified with the Buddhist *pabbajja* ordination” (:147). According to inscriptions during the Middle period (fifteenth through eighteenth century) the use of the word *puos*, which referred to the ordination of Buddhist monks, was used for men and women. It is difficult to be sure what this word exactly meant during that period. However, “it is possible to establish certain facts. First, women as well as men were able to *puos*. Second, this ordination conferred some sort of religious status on its recipient”. These ceremonies had official character and “took place in public, in important religious sites like Angkor Wat, and were attended by religious officials as well as family members and loyal retainers” (:146). But this has changed now, and “the official status of ordained female ascetics has become ambiguous”. Though *puos* is commonly used, Guthrie (:146) argues that '*thvay khluon*' (*thvay* “to give, to offer”: *khluon* “oneself”)³² would be the correct word to use for *tun ji*, because it does not describe a formal ordination. “The ceremony of *thvay khluon* consists of a personal commitment to undertake the five or eight precepts.” It has no official character and “does not need to take place at a wat; it can take place at home. There is no need to have a monk or *ācāry* to perform the ceremony, and there is no set number

32 Khmer: ថ្វាយខ្លួន, this is the same word that Christians use for conversion.

or participants”. This use of the word *puos* supports the point that women could once be ordained. Guthrie (:147) concludes that “[t]he fact that Cambodia's female ascetics are today denied access to their ancient ordination tradition has clearly had a negative effect on the status of the *tun ji*”.

In recent years there has been a change again and since the second half of the 1990s, women have officially been given important and influential roles in society again:

In 1995 and 1997, international conferences attended by *bhikkhuni* and Buddhist laywomen from around the world were held in Cambodia. At these conferences, the participants voted to empower *tun ji* and *upasika* and involve them in the reconciliation and development of Cambodia; to encourage these women to take on leadership roles in society; to change gender perceptions and achieve religious and social equality for women; to train them in social work practices, including counselling victims of domestic violence and trauma; and to encourage national and international networking (Guthrie 2004:147-148).

Social implications

In Theravada Buddhism the social rank of a person is seen as a result of accumulated merits in previous lives. According to this doctrine of karma, “the Cambodian king has been regarded as 'one who has merits' (*neak mean bon*)” (Harris 2005:50). In this sense the hierarchical structure of social and political relationships is representing “a map of the moral cosmos with a righteous king at its centre” (Hansen 2004:44). The authorities are therefore perceived as moral examples and their status makes them unquestionable. This can lead to “ambivalence and tension” (:46).

In 1921 the *Gatilok* ('ways of the world') was finished, an ethics manual composed by Ind³³, that was to serve as a guide for how to live “as a moral Buddhist in the modern world” (:55).

4.4 Religious festivals

There are different religious festivals in Cambodia, but the most important of them are *Pchum Ben* and the Khmer New Year, which is why I will focus on these two. Only for these two occasions in the year do all people travel to their home communities to gather together with their extended families, and therefore they have an important social aspect

33 Ukna Suttantapija Ind (1859-1924) was a monk, writer and famous poet.

as well. They are a crucial part of Khmer culture and affect the dynamics in the family, hence they are important for this study.

Pchum Ben

One of the most important religious festivals in Cambodia is *Pchum Ben*, translated as 'Ancestor's day' or 'festival of the dead'. It takes place in the Khmer month of *Potrobot*, which corresponds to September or October, depending on the Khmer (lunar) calendar. Within a period of fifteen days people have to visit seven temples to bring food for their deceased ancestors. They believe that if the spirits are not fed, they will get angry and might curse the family (Bowers 2003:48).

It is believed that when a person dies, the spirit is not reincarnated right away, but sent to the spirit world. Some are trapped there because of bad karma. Once a year, these spirits are released for fifteen days to search for their relatives. During that time, the living relatives gather together (*pchum*) and prepare balls of sticky rice (*ben*), which they throw all around the temple grounds to feed the hungry spirits as an act of kindness. They also prepare other special foods to offer to the ancestral spirits. The rituals of *Pchum Ben* aim to ease the suffering of those trapped in the spirit world and transfer good karma to the deceased relatives and help them “to become settled ancestors who can garner the respect and karmic patronage of the continuing family” (Holt 2012:7).

According to the beliefs of popular Khmer Buddhism, people who die a tragic, violent death, or die unjustly, will have enormous difficulties to make “the transition to the next life beyond or to a new positive rebirth in this world” (:6). This gives bad karma, because “what transmigrates from this life to the next, at least karmically speaking, is the very quality of the mental conditioning process that is consciously in play at the moment of death”. Therefore Buddhists try to give their relatives good care and comfort so that they can die peacefully. If they cannot die in peace or if there were no rituals performed for them, they will face great suffering in the spirit world and could become “lingering ghosts, the *petas*”, which “often are said to appear to their loved ones in dreams“ (:7). As such, in Cambodia all these people who died during the terrors of the Khmer Rouge and the civil wars, whether as victim or perpetrator, will

suffer in their spirit, “condemned to wander, damned to never reincarnate, unless acknowledged in a proper ceremony. And that ceremony could be the Pchum Ben” (Daravuth 2004:7). Pchum Ben is a means to come to terms with the past, as Holt (2012:10) describes it. According to him, to console the spirits of the tragic dead

is precisely the role of pchum ben in Cambodia. It has become the repository for the articulation of grief, veneration, and hope for the dead, regardless of the circumstances of their deaths. It has been the arena for the expression of actions that assuage the pains of a collective horror for some, and a way to manage a collective guilt for a few others (those who cooperated with the Khmer Rouge). It is a veritable ritual process reflecting how Cambodians are coming to terms with the tragedy of their recent past, and how some of them are dealing with the unknown facts of their own personal family histories.

Although Pchum Ben is a practice of ancestor veneration, the ceremonies take place in the Buddhist temple grounds and are strongly supported and encouraged by Buddhist monks “because it is such a cardinal expression of Khmer culture, national identity and custom” (Holt 2012:11).

Khmer New Year

The Khmer New Year is the other very important religious holiday in Cambodia. The Khmer word for it is *choul chnam thmat*³⁴, which translates as 'enter the new year'. According to the traditional Khmer lunar calendar it is celebrated in April for three days, usually from 14 to 16 April. During these days Cambodians return to their home communities to celebrate with their relatives. The celebrations include purification ceremonies, visiting the temple and playing traditional games. In preparation people clean their houses and set up a shrine, a table where they put incense, candles, fruit and other food or drink as offerings to welcome the *tevada* (angel or deity)³⁵ who is believed to bring in the New Year.

According to legend the *tevada* is one of seven daughters of a Brahmanist king of the gods. There are different variations of this legend, but in essence they agree that for some reason this king had to answer three questions and if he were not able to, he would lose his head. The question was: “In what part of the body is happiness found in the morning? at noontime? in the evening?” The right answer would have been: happiness

34 In Khmer: ចូលឆ្នាំថ្មី.

35 The Khmer word ទេវតា is translated as 'spirit, god, divinity, angel, celestial being'.

in the morning is in the face - people wash it and it is fresh. Happiness at noon is in the chest - people drink water because it is very hot. Happiness in the evening is in the feet, as people always clean their feet before going to bed. The king was not able to find the answer and was decapitated. But before he died he instructed his daughters to take his head in turn and fly around Mount Meru and then bring it to rest in its place. The first year the oldest daughter took the head, the next year the second daughter and so on. Each year, one of his daughters, a *tevada*, takes her turn to take care of the head and also of the people for a year. Therefore people welcome the new *tevada* with offerings and prayers for protection and prosperity during the coming year (Roth 2012a; Bowers 2003:54).

The first day (*Moha Sangkran*³⁶) marks the beginning of the new year, when people welcome the new *tevada*.

The second day (*Vanabat*³⁷) is a day to remember the elders and to donate to the poor and needy. There are dedication ceremonies for the ancestors at the temple and people “build stupas of sand in remembrance of the dead. The stupas represent the burial place of the Buddha's hair and diadem, Culamuni Cetya” (Aquino).

On the third day (*Thngei Loeung Sak*³⁸) people wash Buddha statues with perfumed water as a symbolic act to wash bad deeds away. This is believed to bring them luck, long life, happiness and prosperity. In the same way they also wash their parents and grandparents, asking them for forgiveness for what they have done wrong in the past year. On this day the stupas, built in remembrance of the dead, on the temple grounds, are blessed.

4.5 Christianity in Cambodia

Christian presence in Cambodia can be traced back to the sixteenth century, though there might have been missionaries in that area already in AD 450. Ellison (1991:4) mentions a Nestorian Church conference which took place that year in Damascus, Syria and among the attendants there was “a Metropolitan from the Indo-China peninsula

36 In Khmer: មហាសង្ក្រាន្តិ.

37 In Khmer: វិនបត.

38 In Khmer: ថ្ងៃឡើងសក់.

area". At that conference only bishops from areas with more than 70'000 members were allowed to attend, which suggests that Nestorian missionaries were active in Indo-China in this early period. The use of the cross by rural people to ward off harmful spirits dates back to that time.

The first Roman Catholic missionary came to Cambodia in 1517, but only for a trip of a few weeks (Ellison 1991:5), while permanent Catholic missions were not established until the 1550s. When the Portuguese traders started to settle in Cambodia in 1553, they brought Roman Catholicism with them, and in 1555, Gaspar da Cruz, a Portuguese Dominican, arrived. For some time he stayed at Longvek, the capital at that time. But according to the account of an eyewitness

[h]e left after about a year, disappointed by his inability to make converts, and chose to blame the superstitions of the people and their loyalty to Buddhist monks. Da Cruz was impressed, indeed, by the solidarity of the Cambodians, and in an interesting passage he remarked that they 'dare do nothing of themselves, nor accept anything new without leave of the king, which is why Christians cannot be made without the king's approval' (Chandler 1996a:82).

The influence of these first Roman Catholics resulted in some converts, but there was not much response among the Khmer people. They had reached mainly Vietnamese living in Cambodia and Chinese people who were interested (Penfold 1980:17).

The Catholics did not produce any scriptures in the Khmer language for those four hundred years. They made a Cambodian prayer book with romanised script, but it was only towards the end of the 1960s that the French Catholic priests Father Rodineaux and Father Ponchaud started producing anything in Khmer script (Ellison 1991:5).

The first evangelical missionaries came to Cambodia in 1923: two couples, Rev. and Mrs Arthur Hammond and Rev. and Mrs David W Ellison, with Christian and Missionary Alliance. The year before several Cambodian families had become Christians in Chao Doc province in 'Lower Cambodia' (*Kampuchea Kraom*), the part of Vietnam in the Mekong Delta where many Khmer lived. Hammond ([s a]:29-31) recounts how people started believing:

across the border in what was then called Cochin-China [...] in the area of Triton [...]. There was an old woman living in a village there that some years before had had a dream. Cambodians take great stock in dreams. In her dream she had seen a tall man come into her village with a pack of books on his back, and she was told to buy some of his books and believe what was written therein. Dreams are

recounted before the elders for interpretation, but hers was a conundrum to them. They did not know what it could portend, but she never forgot it.

One day after the missionaries had begun to produce literature for distribution, a colporteur, a tall Vietnamese, came to her village. Sitting in her home close to the centre of the village and she heard her neighbors running and the excited voices outside so she went to the door to see what was going on. She saw the crowd gathering and then her gaze rested on the cause, a tall man with a pack of books that she was talking about and selling to the people. She let out a cry, 'There is the man I saw in my dream! And she sent one of her sons to go buy some of the books. Then she sat in her home and read them to those of her family that were home. She told them, 'We must believe these books, for that was commanded me in the dream.' Her married sons and daughters were called in and the family discussed the matter.

When the missionaries heard about it and came to that village to explain more about the Gospel, “a number of them made their decision to follow the Lord Jesus [...]. That work blossomed into several large groups in a number of distant villages”.

These Christians from *Kampuchea Krom* would later have a significant influence on the Christian movement in Cambodia when they fled there in 1954 after their village was attacked (Hammond [s a]:6; Cormack 2000:51-57).

Two years after their arrival in Cambodia the Hammonds started translating the Bible into Khmer and the Ellisons began a Bible school in Batambang to train leaders and pastors. Many Cambodian Christians received training there during the next few years, but in 1928, it was closed by the authorities who had always treated it with suspicion. Ellison (1991:7) mentions “another small but significant people's movement” that happened in the same year in Skoun, Kampong Cham province:

Earlier a man had died who may have read the tract *The One True God*. On his deathbed he told his family, 'When you hear about the God who is truly concerned and helps people, you must commit yourselves to Him.' When his daughter heard Rev. Arthur Hammond and Pastor Ros, Hom (an expert lawyer in traditional Cambodian village law) preaching the Good News, she said, 'This is what father was speaking about on his deathbed.' Her extended family all received the Lord Jesus Christ as Saviour.

There was not a big number of people coming to the Lord in those days, but there were often extended families accepting Christ as Saviour at the same time. According to Hammond's ([s a]:36) records, their relationships with influential people provided them opportunities to share the Gospel to nearly whole villages, but they did not see any result and were not able to follow up on those who had heard. Many of these people saw

their identity as Buddhists as an unchangeable fact. “Most of them have done everything that Buddha commanded, and believe that is enough to give them a fair chance for their next existence. They are taught from childhood never to desire anything else” (:36).

In December 1932, an edict was published by King Monivong, “forbidding the proselytising of Cambodians” (Penfold 1980:23; Ellison 1991:8). Buddhism was seen as part of Khmer identity and someone who followed another religion a traitor (Cormack 2000:69). As a result of the edict, there were persecutions and the response to the gospel slowed down. But it also had a strengthening effect on the church as only the strongly committed believers remained. Despite all the difficulties, the translation of the New Testament was completed by the end of the 1930s, and the Old Testament was nearly finished. The missionaries and their Khmer co-workers had also produced tracts, hymns and Bible study books for the use of the churches (:70). Christians were able to share their faith with relatives and friends in different villages and sometimes these contacts resulted in new church groups. The missionaries could then visit these groups regularly (Hammond [s a]:63).

In 1946 another edict was published, this time to establish religious freedom. But this did not put an end to the persecution of the Christians because the resistance movement, the Khmer Issarak, hated the Christians and perceived them as spies and sympathising with the French. They were severely persecuted and some even threatened with death. Christian literature was destroyed by the Issarak. This rebel movement was centred in Battambang province, where they engaged in raids and other warfare. Missionaries and other expatriates had to flee to Phnom Penh and the Khmer Christians from the villages gathered in Battambang seeking shelter from the attacks. Many people were killed during these raids, including both Evangelicals and Catholics. Those who remained stood firm in their faith, grew strong and thrived. In 1949 the Bible School was moved to Takmau, near Phnom Penh, where it was safer (Cormack 2000:74-79).

When Cambodia gained independence in 1953, the Issarak did not have any more reason to exist and the result was “a decade of relative peace and tranquility (1955-

1965), during which the Cambodian church was watered and nourished in a refreshing climate of calm and prosperity” (:80). The first Khmer Bible was published in 1954 – although the translation had been finished several years earlier, it had to be rewritten and adapted to the new spelling rules when these were revised by the government and the first official dictionary was published. A specially bound copy of the Bible was presented to King Sihanouk. More Christian materials were printed and in 1957, Far Eastern Broadcasting Corporation (FEBC) started broadcasting the Gospel into Cambodia (Maher 2012:50).

Ellison (1991:6) mentions a significant preponderance of women in one district of Battambang province in the 1930s as well as in the 1950s, when he was a missionary there. As most women were illiterate whereas men received an education, this hindered the spiritual growth. The missionaries therefore started literacy classes, where, as one example, Rev. Chan Ham received his first education.

With the political changes in 1965 and due to an anti-American climate, American citizens had to leave as their visas were not renewed any more. This included most missionaries, leaving behind only two French couples. Even the local Christians were affected too. They were identified with America, which was perceived as the national enemy at that time. Persecution started again and the leaders were ordered to close their churches down and “to sign an official form agreeing not to hold any more Christian meetings without government approval” (Cormack 2000:111). This was pretended to be for their own protection and when the church leaders signed they did not realise that the government did not intend to ever give them permission to meet. Four leaders were arrested for violating this agreement, following a meeting for which they had only oral approval, as they were not able to get written permission. The Cambodian church now was on its own, without the support of the missionaries. Earlier, support for Cambodian pastors had been gradually reduced until there was none, which brought considerable difficulties but it proved helpful for the church to be better prepared for this change (Ellison 1991:8). During the following, difficult years, a small Cambodian church grew strong through a “painful process of thinning and pruning” (Cormack 2000:115).

The situation changed with the coup d'état in 1970, when Lon Nol and Sirik Matak came to power. They declared freedom of religion (Penfold 1980:15). American missionaries were able to return. In the years to come until 1975, before the Khmer Rouge took over, the Cambodian church experienced a period of growth. The Cambodia Research Network (2007:xix) estimates that it grew from about 1'000 in 1965 to 10'000 believers in 1975 and Don Cormack (2000:126) records that “the three leading churches in Phnom Penh exploded into thirty major centres of worship, as well as countless other cell groups and home fellowships”. Meanwhile the civil war intensified and the influence of the communists grew stronger, until in a final step, Phnom Penh fell to the Khmer Rouge on 17 April 1975. All the missionaries had to evacuate. During the genocide that followed, nearly four years long, the Cambodian people, including the church, suffered greatly. Only a few hundred Christians and a few leaders survived. Maher (2012:13) mentions four pastors from Ta Khmao Bible School who survived and Ellison (1991:11) refers to “a list of 33 pastors and leaders of the church”, out of which 27 “were martyred or died as part of the policy of enforced starvation”. Bibles, along with other books, were burned, and churches destroyed.

After the 'liberation' through the Vietnamese in January 1979, the persecution of the church continued for another decade. Christians were not allowed to meet, Bibles were confiscated and the influential believers who were known to the government were kept under constant surveillance. But the church was growing in the underground. Thousands of Khmer people fled to Thailand during this time. During their time in the refugee camps along the Thai-Cambodian border many of them heard the Gospel; also a Khmer church started to grow through the influence of Khmer Christians who were able to flee there, like Barnabas Mam (2012), pastor Reach Yea (:187), pastor Hom (Cormack 2000:291-293) and others, as well as missionaries working in the camps. Thousands of Khmer people came to know the Lord Jesus Christ in these camps along the border; some of them would later proceed to other countries in the West, while others went back to Cambodia.

In 1990, freedom of religion was granted and Christianity was thus formally recognised. The United Nations Transitional Authority in Cambodia (UNTAC) was established, and all the refugees were repatriated to Cambodia by 1993. The church in

Cambodia and the Cambodian church from the camps became united. Missionaries and Christian relief agencies as well as other international NGOs started entering Cambodia again. The church continues to grow; according to the Cambodia Research Network (2007:30) there was an estimate of 260'000 protestant Christians in 2008.

Examples of women of faith

The following examples will illustrate some of the influence of women on the development of the Cambodian church.

In the early seventies when the missionaries were able to go back to Cambodia Esther Kroh was among those returning. She reports (cited by Penfold 1980:63): “the church in my house had tripled, and people had overflowed on to my lawn”. This was a result of the efforts of her house-helper:

Kim Nyol, whose husband had gone off to Laos, leaving her with three small children, had made a firm commitment to Christ and had begun teaching Bible stories to the neighborhood children. She held classes in the front lawn out in the hot sun while the church in the house split out into the back garden. Without any training Kim Nyol told stories with such an impact that the children listened eagerly and brought their friends along.

Samoeun Intal first got in contact with Christians through English classes in the early 1970's. Then in 1975, she fled to the Philippines with her husband. There she eventually started working with FEBC as a language assistant and during that time God started to work in her heart, preparing her for what she would later be doing in Cambodia. “Even as Pol Pot was dragging Cambodia back into the Stone Age, Samoeun was becoming a part of God's plan for that country” (Maher 2012:50). Over the years, God gave her a vision for her country. In 1993, the family (with three children now) returned to Cambodia, with Samoeun as Field Director of FEBC. Till today, many Cambodians have heard about Jesus and received teaching through FEBC, which has even reached remote areas. But she also had a lot of influence through personal contacts, discipling staff members and was “actively involved in the international Christian community in Cambodia [...]”. She was “a founding member of Cambodian Christian Services and the Evangelical Fellowship of Cambodia, and sat on World Vision's Training of Timothys Executive Board” (:51-53).

Manit was the oldest of three siblings who lived with her mother, whose husband had left her for another woman. Brenda Sloggett (2005:80-84) wrote down her story as it was told by Barnabas Mam, including some general thoughts about women in the Cambodian church. Manit married a believer and through his influence, the whole family accepted Jesus Christ as their Saviour. After returning to Cambodia from the refugee camps in Thailand, the couple

took into their care several young men who were left orphans by the Khmer Rouge years. They nurtured these orphans in the faith and Manit became the leading influence in that place. This was a change from the usual tradition of women never having any place at all. Their church was used as a catalyst in bringing churches together. Manit organised seminars and pastors' conferences which I [Barnabas] sometimes attended. Now there are over a hundred churches in Battambang area [...].

In Cambodia there is no problem of gender even though we came out of a Hinduistic tradition where women are illtreated by men [...]. Buddhism came to our country in the eighth century and it was accepted in the nation until the Killing Fields. More men were killed and far more women survived, which necessitated them being the head of the family. A mother has to play two roles, a provider and a manager of the home. Some women are in the leadership of the church, and Manit is one of them today, and she is accepted. I thank God that the church in Cambodia does not fight or argue over this issue.... Manit continues to be a great leader in those churches and despite our gender bias background we are seeing and accepting that women who are called by the Lord can be effective in his kingdom.

In a village where there was a Christian community development project, a church was started as a result of one Christian woman sharing her faith. She was the widow of a former village chief who was murdered by a political opponent. She “was attending Bible school in Phnom Penh”, Sloggett (2005:154-155) recounts:

Despite the circumstances this lady remained strong in her faith and began to hold Bible studies and teach praise songs to the other villagers. There is no electricity in this village so the little fellowship group began in candlelight. As the houses are constructed in simple wood and thatch, sound carries. Some opposed these meetings at first but after receiving love and care from the FAITH [Food And Income, Training and Health] team regularly, there are now 50 of these people attending the simple church that has been built near the clean waterwell FAITH provided. The evangelising has not been done by the FAITH project but has sprung out of a desire of the ex-village chief's widow to spread the good news of the gospel.

Molly Yos, one of 12 siblings (of which only two were boys) from a family in the

countryside, came to the OMF (Oversees Missionary Fellowship) youth centre near the Olympic stadium in Phnom Penh with a friend, to learn English, which they did from the Bible. Through that she eventually began to believe and to attend a church. Together with others she also started to go out to share the Gospel. Her two younger sisters became Christians through her and eventually she also led her initially quite resistant parents to Christ. In 1989, after a petition had been signed asking for freedom of religion, Molly and her sisters, Sithan and Sokkun, paid regular visits to the house of the minister of Cults and Religion because he wanted to know more about Christianity. This relationship continued, and was significant in getting permission to finally be given for Cambodian Christians to worship legally according to their tradition. Maher (2012:77; cf :68-78) concluded that “Sithan was the primary mover and shaker in obtaining freedom for Christianity”.

Molly's friend, Eang, played a very strategic role for the underground church during the 1980s. She was selling flowers at the market. This gave her the opportunity to get in contact with all kinds of people without arousing suspicion. So she became a main connection for the underground church as well as for the foreigners from World Vision, receiving messages and materials like Bibles, tracts, hymnbooks or cassettes and secretly delivering it to the underground church (:175).

In 2000 Navy Chhan was exploring the possibility of partnering with the Evangelical Fellowship of Cambodia (EFC), thinking that she could help in capacity building with the EFC board. Maher (:326) comments: “It was a tough process to have Navy accepted by a very patriarchal board, but over time progress was made and now Navy is a respected member of the EFC board”.

There are also examples of women who opened their houses for cell group meetings which eventually became churches (Maher 2012:200) and there are many more influential women who contributed to the growth of the Cambodian church, but are not mentioned here. Their examples further demonstrate how God is also using women to advance his kingdom in Cambodia.

4.6 Conclusion: Forming religious identity

After examining the different belief systems that are influencing Cambodian culture, I will conclude this chapter by summing up the findings and looking at how religious beliefs are passed on and what role women play regarding forming religious identity, as this the focus of this study.

Religion is part of life in Cambodia and religious practices are closely connected with cultural habits. People perform religious ceremonies and rituals in order to influence the unseen forces and find solutions to problems in daily life. The two biggest religious festivals, the Khmer New Year and Pchum Ben, are also very important social events, and it is difficult to be part of the family and not take part in the religious components of the celebrations.

It became clear that throughout history, the belief system of the Khmer has been a blend of elements from different religions, with Buddhist, animist and Hindu influences most visible, but nonetheless it is perceived as one and therefore I will also treat it as one belief system and not divide it into different religious systems.

Looking at the findings with regard to the question of how religious beliefs are passed on, the main conclusion emerging from this chapter is that they are more absorbed than taught. From a very early age children accompany their mother or grandmother wherever she goes, including to the temple and are just naturally exposed to the practices there. They are, for example, instructed to respect the monks, may also learn to chant and in that way become familiar with some religious teachings.

Interestingly there seems to be no formal teaching for everyone in the traditional Khmer belief-system, unlike the common practice in Christian churches with the Sunday school or children's program where they are taught Biblical truths through stories, etc.

Concerning the role of women, this puts them in a very important and influential position as children are around their mother nearly all the time. This gives her a lot of opportunities to pass on her belief, verbally and non-verbally. Despite the Buddhist thinking that they are inferior to men and high religious positions are mainly reserved for men, women do have a significant impact through their personal relationships. Their

influence and how to strengthen it will be discussed in 5.2.

Christianity came to Cambodia late and it took quite a long time before there was significant growth. A main reason for that might be that the Khmer identity is strongly connected with being Buddhist. Converting to Christ is a major step in a society where participation in religious practices and social belonging are closely linked. And coming from a religious background where different religious systems can coexist and be mixed together, it must be extremely difficult to embrace the concept of one God who cannot tolerate any other gods besides him.

5. IMPLICATIONS FOR FORMING RELIGIOUS IDENTITY

5.1 *Defining the context*

The gospel always speaks to people in a specific context, there is no “pure’ gospel, isolated from culture” (Bosch 1991:297; cf Hiebert et al 1999: Loc. 110) It is “always embodied as praxis [...] articulated in language in a context and expressed in a specific worldview” (Kritzinger 2013:39). In order to be able to communicate the gospel effectively, it is therefore essential to understand the culture, beliefs and practices of a people.

Though most Cambodians would probably claim to be Buddhist, as it is often said that “to be Cambodian is to be Buddhist”, it has been shown that Cambodian Buddhism is in fact syncretism, mixing Buddhism with elements of animism and some Hindu elements, perceived as one (see chapter 4). Not only is it important to understand a religious system, but also how it affects people's lives, as Koyama (1999:93) argues:

Perhaps we pay undue attention to *ism*, and in contrast, too little attention to *ist*. It is obvious that the study of *Buddhism* demands less concentration and energy than the study of the living person, called a *Buddhist*.

We must study *Buddhism*, of course, if we wish to understand the *Buddhist*. Our ultimate interest must lie, however, with understanding the *Buddhist* and not *Buddhism*. What matters for the Christian gospel is not *Buddhism*, but the *Buddhist*.

A similar idea is reflected by Schreier (1985:157), who describes basic principles of how to deal with syncretism and dual religious systems, pointing out the importance of addressing the whole religious system and how it manifests in daily life, including "which social relations it maintains, what problems it solves, what benefits accrue from keeping things as they are" and states that religion is not only “a *view* of life”, but also “a *way* of life”.

In order to be relevant, religion needs to address people's questions about life, such as “the meaning of life and death for the living; well-being and the threats of illness, drought, flood, and failure; and guidance in a world of unknowns” (Hiebert 1994:199-200). For the Khmer the whole spirit world is very important. Ancestral spirits, tutelary spirits such as the *neak ta*, etc. are believed to have a vital influence on people's life,

helping them to succeed or - if they are not being pleased - cause illness, death and natural disasters. All these spiritual forces belong to what Hiebert described as “the excluded middle” (:189-201), based on his framework of three levels as follows:

<i>High religion:</i> Cosmic gods, angels, demons, spirits
<i>Folk or low religion:</i> Local gods, ancestors, different spirits and ghosts Magic and astrology
<i>Science</i>

Table 1: the three levels according to Hiebert

The lower level includes what is “seen or empirical”, what can be observed by the senses and scientifically proved. The upper, as well as the middle level are “unseen or supernatural”, they cannot be naturally explained, but only perceived in supernatural experiences such as miracles. But whereas the upper level (high religion) is described as “other worldly”, happening in other spheres, the middle level belongs to this world, like the lower level (:194). In order to be relevant, a holistic approach is necessary, which addresses all three levels. It needs to be made clear that God is involved in and has power over all three levels. The middle level has been very much neglected by Western approaches to mission, which means that these missionaries did not have answers to questions related to the spirit world, magic and so on, which play a vital part in the lives of people in many non-Western cultures. Often this went along with a denial of the existence of the spirits (:197). Without including this middle level, the proclamation of the Gospel cannot be good news, because it does not deal with the main forces that have a great influence on the lives of the Khmer, namely the whole spirit world, which strongly affects their decisions and behaviour as described in chapter four (4.1).

The above reasons show the importance of understanding the situation and beliefs of a people, in order to proclaim the gospel in a way that is meaningful to them. Before discussing the influence of women on spiritual formation, I will therefore define the context for the rural Khmer. Schreiter (1985:139) describes different approaches of studying folk religion, including “looking at it from the point of view of the participants

rather than viewing the system as a whole” and notes three areas that need to be considered in doing so: psychological, social and religious. I will use these three categories here to summarise the main findings above, considering psychological, social and religious factors and how they might impact the communication of the gospel. This is not exhaustive, but will provide a basis to understand different aspects that need to be considered in communicating the gospel to the Khmer.

5.1.1 Psychological considerations

Psychological considerations include the need for “access to power in times of crisis” and for “multiple and direct mediations of this power” (Schreier 1985:139-140). It is further a “psychological task of religious symbolism [...] to help make the world a meaningful place (:140). These are questions of the middle level that deal with well-being and meaning in this life and are met by folk religion. Hiebert, Shaw and Tiéno (1999: Loc. 6704) state that folk religions are, at their core, “human efforts to control life”.

In Cambodia, like many other folk religion practitioners, people “seek power as the key to prosperity, health, success, and control over life” (:Loc. 6751). Religious beliefs shape the lives of Khmer people: fear of spirits is omnipresent and influences even the simplest decision in daily life as wrong decisions might make the spirits angry and cause trouble. The Khmer have many religious practices that attempt to access the power of the supernatural beings in order to control what is happening in their lives. They use magic, rites or offerings to the spirits trying to secure their well-being. For example, they make offerings to the *neak ta* in order to get protection or a good harvest; when they are sick, they go to a traditional healer or witch doctor who might use magic or offerings to the spirits in order to get healed; before a house is built, earth spirits have to be appeased and the right position of the house and time for construction determined by an *achar* and many more.

For the communication of the gospel it is important to proclaim the involvement and power of God on this level too. This experience of Jesus' power over the different spirits and supernatural beings, described by Hiebert (1994:199) as “power encounter”, is very

important for the Khmer, for a victorious encounter means that they can be freed from their fear of spirits, which had been dominating their lives. The daily battle against supernatural forces is very real, also for Christians, with witchcraft and magic practiced not only around them, but also affecting their own lives. But in Jesus they are no longer at their mercy. The Bible recognises the existence of these evil powers and advises to take them seriously, as it is written in Ephesians 6:12: “For our struggle is not against flesh and blood, but against the rulers, against the authorities, against the powers of this dark world and against the spiritual forces of evil in the heavenly realms”.³⁹ This passage clearly describes the reality of the spiritual battle, which Khmer people are often confronted with. In the local Khmer church that I am working with, we often hear testimonies of people experiencing deliverance from evil spirits dominating their lives and thoughts or Jesus working miraculously in their lives through supernatural protection, healing, etc.

When people become Christians, being used to accessing the power of the spirits and magic to control their lives, they might be tempted to apply the same mechanistic principles to God, using him as a source of power as they used to do with the spirits. It can take a long time, before a new Christian, with a background of syncretism like the Khmer, can really understand what it involves to follow Christ. Schreiter (1985:158) points out that the

conversion process [...] is much slower than we had first thought. While genuine and sincere commitment can be made on the part of those baptized, there are many other factors involved, which take longer time for resolution and incorporation into a culture. Thus what appears to be syncretism or a dual system may be but reflective of the stages of the conversion process.

A problem that can result when the communication of the gospel does not include the middle level is „split-level Christianity“ (Hiebert et al 1999: Loc. 145). Problems located in the middle level will still be dealt with like before, even after someone has made a clear decision to follow Christ. Hence „[d]eeply committed Christians faithfully attend church services and pray to God in times of need, but feel compelled during the week to go to a local shaman for healing, a diviner for guidance, and an exorcist for deliverance from spirit oppression“ (:Loc. 148). This is also a danger in Cambodia.

³⁹ All Bible verses are taken from the New International Version (NIV).

5.1.2 Social considerations

The social considerations described by Schreiter (1985:140) deal with the way social relations and folk religion are connected and influencing each other. When social relations change, the “religious semiotic system”⁴⁰ will change too. An example of a change of social relations is when a family moves to the city.

If patterns of popular religion no longer give a symbolic unity to the rest of life, they can die. We are often caught in patterns of suggesting a rural spirituality with its emphasis on the unity of work, family, and social relations to an urban people who find work, family, and social relations as operating in quite different spheres. Religious universes crumble for a reason, and that reason is most often that they are no longer integrative of the rest of social relations (:140).

Social change and change of religious practice need to go together. A changed understanding of God and how to relate to him must be accompanied by a changed understanding of social interactions. These changes need to happen at a similar pace, although they are usually not entirely even. “If social change comes too quickly, previous religious practice can collapse. If new religious practice outpaces social change, it can lead to utopianism, idealism, and cynicism” (:140). When a group of people receives the gospel this will also result in a transformation of culture. “If the message of the gospel is genuinely heard in the local culture, that message must find a place among the most fundamental messages of that culture, with concomitant change in codes, signs, and the entire sign system” (:157).

Family bonds

The family is the basic unit of Cambodian society. There are strong bonds within the family, including extended family. Within the family structure, the mother is usually the main person of reference for the children and develops the strongest bonds with them. There is often a mistrust towards strangers.

Important occasions for the whole extended family to gather are Khmer New Year and *pchum ben*. Apart from the social aspects, these ceremonies also include offerings for the spirits. Once someone becomes a Christian this can cause major problems,

40 Religious sign system: “Semiotics is the study of signs (from the Greek *semeion* = sign). It sees a culture as a vast communication network, whereby both verbal and nonverbal messages are circulated along elaborate, interconnected pathways, which, together, create the systems of meaning. Central to this process are the bearers of the message” (Schreiter 1985:49).

because he cannot take part in the offerings, which are seen as an important form of honouring the ancestors, as well as being a vital part of Khmer culture and identity (see 4.4.). Not participating is therefore often interpreted as not honouring the parents and forsaking one's own culture. This has led to the reputation Christianity has had in Cambodia: a 'foreign' religion and teaching of disrespect to parents. It can be very challenging, especially for Christians who are the only believers in their family, to find a way of expressing respect for the parents without participating in offerings for the dead. Local evangelical churches are dealing differently with this problem, with some still keeping the ritual of making traditional food for *pchum ben*, but, instead of offering it to the deceased ancestors they would give it to the poor and have celebrations in honour of the parents who are still alive.⁴¹

When Khmer Christians do not participate in the rituals and offerings to spirits, they may also be made responsible when something bad happens, because their behaviour can be seen as the cause that displeases the spirits. For this reason believers may face ill-treatment by relatives and neighbours.

On the other hand, Christians may find fellowship and mutual support in the local church, with brothers and sisters in Christ. This Christian community is very important, as a new 'family' for the believers, but also as testimony for the people around them, when God's love is reflected in these relationships.⁴² I have often heard Khmer Christians mentioning that they were first attracted to Christianity by the love and acceptance they saw among the Christians, who did not look down on people because they were poor or uneducated as much of Cambodian society does.

Hierarchy and patronage

Hierarchy and patronage have been shaping the social interactions in Cambodian society for a long time and therefore also need to be taken into account when communicating the gospel. In order to be effective, communication needs to respect the social norms of a community. Bailey (2015:135) examined “[c]ommunication strategies for Christian witness among the Lao” and noted that communication needs to follow

41 Wiebe (2011:134-135) suggests for Christian communities to use *pchum ben* to celebrate and revere the parents.

42 See John 13:35: “By this everyone will know that you are my disciples, if you love one another”.

“the structure of Lao relationships”. In a hierarchically structured culture like Cambodia, similar to Laos, this means it must be along the system of '*bong b'oun*', from the older to the younger, but also within groups of males or females or and through rituals. It is hardly possible for someone with a higher status to accept teaching from a person who is lower in the hierarchy. This might also explain why most attempts to reach parents with the gospel through their children are not successful in Cambodia, as the natural way of communication goes the other direction, from the parents to the children.

Unlike in Western individualistic cultures, the children in collectivist cultures, even when they are grown up, will generally not make major decisions without consulting their parents, aunts, uncles or some authority figure first, because they are deemed wiser and therefore know better what is good for them. This also includes the decision to follow Christ. In the Cambodian context too, it is normal to make decisions based on the advice of a person of respect and authority and this does not exclude decisions related to faith. Particularly for missionaries from the West this is often difficult to understand and they might interpret that a decision to follow Christ is not the person's own decision but he is just doing what the authority figures says, or conversely the missionaries might see it as an excuse for not wanting to accept the gospel when someone wants to talk about it with an authority figure first, though this is not necessarily the case (Rickards & O'Brien 2012: Loc. 1104). In the local Khmer church I am working with, we often see young people coming to church for some time, invited by friends. Some even decide to follow Jesus, but after a while they stop coming because their parents do not want them to go to a Christian church. This is especially true for young women, as they are very protected by the family, whereas the young men are given more freedom. From my experience it is often the mothers, who make their daughters break contact with the Christians and it seems that almost always the daughters conform to what the parents ask them to do. This might be because they believe that the parents, as their authority figures, know better what is good for them.

Today, as throughout Cambodia's history, patron-client relationships still form a key foundation of the Khmer social structure and therefore also affect the Christian witness.

As mentioned above, effective communication goes from one with higher status to one with lower status, from patron to client. But, according to how the patronage system works, the client forms expectations of the patron too. Bailey (2015:135) suggests that “older communicators will need to be aware and live up to the social responsibility to provide advice and security for those who are younger”. While people might take a decision to follow Christ quite quickly, they might also “abandon the faith just as quickly, should the older one in the relationship not provide the kind of care expected of them” (:135). If an outsider such as a missionary (usually perceived as higher in status) shares the gospel, the one receiving the gospel has expectations. This causes problems for foreign missionaries, because they might unknowingly create expectations that they cannot fulfil in the long term. Bailey emphasizes the importance of connecting them with local believers who can fulfil that role and, even more important, “to teach the younger one to look to God as the one who can provide for all his or her needs” (:135).

5.1.3 Religious considerations

All human beings have an innate “deep seated need for completion and salvation to be found only in God” (Schreier 1985:141), though religious behaviour has various motivations and can be expressed in different ways. There are questions about the ultimate destiny, where we come from and where we go to. These are related to the upper level in Hiebert's framework, the “high religion”.

Religious practices and ceremonies are very much part of the Cambodian culture. It is not surprising that nearly seventy percent of the people interviewed by Wiebe (2011:93; 129) mentioned that they had made some religious experiences, which means that they experienced help through such rituals and religious practices. For younger people those experiences were mainly related to well-being and success in this life as described under psychological considerations (5.1.1). The focus of this experience seemed to change according to the age; whereas for young people happiness, success and protection in this life were of main concern (:100-103), for older people it was more important to gain insight and get good karma (:104-109). Wiebe (:112) interprets this change of focus as a process of development from magic-animistic thinking, as it is

prevalent in younger people, towards Buddhist thinking as they grow older. Taking into account the historical development of Buddhism in Cambodia (see 4.3), the fact that throughout history animism and Buddhism have always been coexisting, and the integration of spirit shrines and practices such as ancestor veneration at the (Buddhist) wat, I would rather call it a shift of emphasis within a syncretistic system than a development from one to the other.

But Wiebe's findings suggest that, as people get older, they start to think more about the future and what comes beyond death. These questions cause them to focus more on Buddhist principles, such as karma and reincarnation. One's karma determines how a person is reincarnated, good karma results in a higher reincarnation towards the final goal, to get out of the cycle of reincarnations, reaching nirvana. People have to make merits to get good karma. High status, wealth, as well as poverty and suffering of a person, are seen as the result of deeds in previous lives and cannot be changed. There is no such concept as forgiveness. Karma can only be improved by accumulating merits. This implies, for example, that people are poor as a result of their bad deeds in previous lives. They will not be pitied by others because their poverty is perceived as what they deserve based on their actions. However, people give alms to the poor in order to accumulate merits for themselves. Merit can also be transferred, for example, from the children to their deceased ancestors, as described in relation to *pchum ben*, (see 4.4) or when a housewife “gives food to a monk [she] earns merit not only for herself, but also for her family” (Hiebert et al 1999: Loc. 2441).

Another implication of karma is fatalism. Destitute people often have no motivation nor initiative to try to improve their lives, believing that it cannot be changed anyway. Doing community development work among the poor in rural areas of Cambodia, I often faced people with this attitude. They have no hope that their situation can improve and therefore do not do anything about it. Only when they see others, who have successfully managed to make a positive change in their lives, can they be motivated to follow their example. For example, when teaching Khmer villagers about new agricultural methods as a way to improve their crops, it is usually difficult to motivate them to apply what they learned. Only when they see positive results of someone applying it, they will follow the example. The Khmer seem to start believing once they

see that something works, not only with regard to agriculture, but also with regard to religious beliefs, according to the findings in Wiebe's (2011:130) research. In contrast to fatalism as a result of karma theory, the Christian faith, offering forgiveness, makes a new start possible, freed from the consequences of their bad deeds and gives new hope. The positive example of a Christian reflecting this hope despite living in straitened circumstances can give hope to others.

Only a woman who really experienced this hope in her own life can reflect it. To be able to fully embrace the gospel message Cambodian women need to discover what it means for them, in their situation, because, as Fabella (1989:4) argues, “[s]alvation/liberation takes on different meanings within a reality of massive poverty and multiple oppression on the one hand, and of religious, cultural and ideological plurality on the other”. This calls for a contextual theology. Despite many cultural differences, Asian women are sharing many of the struggles of gender discrimination and injustice, which is reflected in their way of doing theology and for this reason I will give a rough sketch of Asian feminist theology in the next paragraph.

Asian feminist theology

Asian feminist theology emerged in response to liberation theologies (Kim 2012:1). In the 1970s Asian women first gathered to discuss the Bible and their faith in the context of their own realities. These were the beginnings of Asian feminist theology (Kwok 2000:9). They realised that neither Third World theologies by male theologians nor Western feminist theologies take into account the specific reality of Asian women with their struggles and challenges and that “without their distinctive voices as Asians and as women, the emerging theologies in Asia cannot be liberating or relevant, not for themselves or for the Church or society at large” (Fabella & Park 1989:vii). Asian women theologians are part of the women's commission of the Ecumenical Association of Third World Theologians (EATWOT). While there are struggles such as poverty and oppression, which are common to women in Third World countries, there are also clear differences as cultures and traditions are very diverse, even among the different Asian countries. There are therefore many different ways of doing Asian feminist theology, as the contexts are very different (Kwok 2000:10).

Some Asian women theologians do not want to be identified as 'feminist' theologians because the term is sometimes associated with “radicalism and separatism advocated by middle-class European and American women” (:9). Unlike Western feminist theologians, the fact that Jesus was a man did not pose a problem for Asian female theologians. Fabella (1989:4) describes his maleness as “functional”:

By being male, Jesus could repudiate more effectively the male definition of humanity and show the way to a right and just male-female relationship, challenging both men and women to change their life patterns. Historically, however, christology has been patriarchalized and has been the doctrine of the Christian tradition most used against women.

Jesus set an example with his life, also in the way he related with the poor and marginalized and how he treated women. The kingdom of God is central in his message and he lived according to the values of the kingdom (:5). Kwok (2000:10) understands Asian feminist theology “not only as a form or theological reflection but also as a political movement to transform the church and society so that women's freedom and dignity will be fully recognized”. His salvation calls for a holistic response that impacts the whole life and society. In a context of poverty and oppression salvation needs to include liberation, as Jesus came to set people free (Luke 4:18⁴³) and his whole life, actions and teachings modelled this.

Central for Asian feminist theologians is their “[c]oncern for the poor and marginalized women” (Wong 2010:21). They are committed to work towards transformation while seeking to work in partnership with men in order to change community towards “a new humanity in God's image” (:25). Their contribution as Asian women shall be an integral part of an Asian theology and not something separate, so that it can be significant to both men and women. Fabella and Park (1989:x) state in the introduction to *We dare to dream*:

Our vision is to see men and women in communities of genuine partnership, with true reciprocity and mutual respect, in communities that care not only for people but for our whole planet earth. We envision a new world; a world that truly mirrors God's design; a just, caring, and peace-filled world – indeed, a new creation. We dare to dream...

May more and more Cambodian women dare to dream too, and be empowered to

43 Luke 4:18: “The Spirit of the Lord is on me, because he has anointed me to proclaim good news to the poor. He has sent me to proclaim freedom for the prisoners and recovery of sight for the blind, to set the oppressed free”.

make a change in their social environment, sharing their hope in Christ and working towards a community where people live together as God intended.

5.2 *The agency and influence of rural Khmer women*

Having described the context, I will now look at the part that the rural Khmer women play in it, in what ways they influence the formation of religious identity and how their agency and influence could be strengthened and intentionally used to form Christian identity in a predominantly Buddhist context.

Cambodian women have significant authority, though they are often represented as “powerless” from a perspective that associates power with public leadership and focuses on political, economic and military control. When other forms of power are taken into consideration, “male leadership is balanced by female authority” (Jacobsen 2008:5). Also with regard to advancing Christianity in Cambodia, women can have considerable influence. The examples of women of faith mentioned above (see 4.5) show some of the impact women had on the growth of the Cambodian church by living out and sharing their faith in their natural social environment.

The findings about the Khmer religious system (chapter 4) show that religion is rather absorbed than taught, as there is no institutionalised religious education for the general population. This is also reflected in the results of Wiebe's (2011:91) research, where all the interviewees said that they learned religion in an informal way, though some also had formal religious education, mainly the older people, men and women alike. Informal learning can happen anywhere, in natural encounters, conversations, through stories, songs and others. Through their natural relationships, women have plenty of opportunities to share their faith with their children and others.

I will now discuss ways how rural Khmer women can influence the formation of religious identity as they have become apparent in this research, including possible challenges it might bring about, as well as ways of how this influence might be strengthened in order to reach the Khmer with the Good News.

5.2.1 Being a role model

The way a woman lives her life can have a big impact on the people around her. This is of course true for men too, but my focus is on women within their network of relationships, which is different from that of men, and the way they can wield influence within these relationships.

The main area of influence for Cambodian women is the household and the extended family. They are the main caregivers and persons of reference for the children, who develop very strong bonds with their mothers which continue also when the children grow up. When the children are young, they are usually around their mother, and she takes them with her whenever she goes anywhere, including to the temple (or, for Christians, to church). When the girls get older they do household chores with the mother and learn from her. A natural way of learning is by example, not only for practical things, but, even more importantly, of attitudes and values as a mother's words and actions reflect her values. A child learns values at an early age in response to the environment (O'Leary 2006:34). When a mother is living out Christian values, the child will absorb them and learn from her example. He or she also learns from the way the mother deals with difficulties, where she is looking to for help and so on. She is therefore shaping the values of her children by her actions and attitudes.

How can this influence be strengthened? First, it is important that women be made more aware of the influence they have, which also carries certain responsibilities. They are models for their children anyway; the question is what values and attitudes their actions represent. This leads to the second point: the need for discipleship. Many Cambodian cultural values are very different from what the Bible teaches. It takes a long time before a new believer can really grasp the implication of Christian teaching in his life. Many cultural and religious practices are tightly woven together. Clear Biblical teaching, contextualised for the situation of the Khmer, is therefore very important.⁴⁴ Once a woman really understands the message of the gospel and applies it in her life,

⁴⁴ It is beyond the scope of this research to go into detail about what that looks like. Wiebe (2011:4) worked out a holistic missiological approach to the rural Khmer context, including “a narrative theology, spiritual encounter with evil powers, and an incarnational ministry as good news to the poor”.

the Christian values will, through her example, also be passed on to the children. Cambodian women need to discover who Christ is for them, in their reality. The answers to Jesus' question "Who do you say I am?" (Mt 16:15) not only reflect what the Bible says but also the individual context of the person replying (Fabella 1989:3). As a Western woman I can never fully grasp the reality of a Cambodian woman. Therefore it seems important that as missionaries and 'outsiders', we do not impose an answer on them, but help them do discover it for themselves.

Apart from the family, the good example of a Christian woman can have influence on her wider social environment. By living out Christian values such as love and mercy or honesty, she can make a difference that will not go unnoticed. In a society shaped by a blended Buddhist worldview, as expressed through the idea of karma, people living in misery are looked down on, as their situation is seen as a result of their deeds in previous lives. No one wants to relate to them nor show compassion. When Jesus came into this world, he showed a different example and his followers are called to do likewise.⁴⁵ This can include helping someone in need in practical ways. Even if a Cambodian woman's possibilities and resources are limited, treating someone with respect and valuing a person despite her poverty, instead of looking down on him or her, can make a big difference in someone's life. Buddhists also give to the poor, but out of a different motivation, namely to gain merit. Salvation by grace is an important concept to be addressed in discipleship because otherwise merit making is easily transferred to the Christian belief and prevents believers from fully experiencing freedom in Christ and a secure hope for the future even if their current situation might be difficult and poverty-stricken.

Acts of compassion towards people who are poor and marginalised by society can open not only their heart for the gospel but also those observing it. This was my experience while working in a prison hospital: A long-term patient, who was initially very opposed to Christianity, finally asked us for a Bible and started reading it, inviting her son to join her. Her reason for the change and her interest in the Bible was, that she had seen Christians caring for the sick prisoners, but she never saw a Buddhist doing

⁴⁵ See John 20:21b: "As the Father has sent me, I am sending you" and John 14:12: "Very truly I tell you, whoever believes in me will do the works I have been doing [...]"

anything to help them.

5.2.2 Child rearing: shaping gender roles

It is a mother's task to bring up the children and educate them. This includes teaching them good behaviour. When they are little this mainly includes the traditional greeting (*sampheah*) and giving respect to older people. Once the girls are older, these instructions also involve traditional gender roles according to the norms embodied in the *chbab srey*, as they have been passed on from generation to generation.⁴⁶ These are ironically taught by loving mothers who want the best for their daughters and want them to be able to behave appropriately, which will also help them to find a good husband. However, the female ideal as described in the *chbab srey* seems to build up a negative self-image of women and impedes the full implementation of gender equality as well as the fight against gender-based violence (see chapter 3.6). This needs to be addressed and reflected in the light of the Bible. The table below compares the main points of the *chbab srey* with what the Bible teaches.

Chbab srey	Bible
<p>The wife has to always submit to her husband's will, to respect him and serve him well, whatever he does, even if he treats her really bad (Mai [s a]:3). She shall not be offended if the husband finds another wife or lover (Zimmermann 1994:25).</p>	<p>“Submit to one another out of reverence for Christ. Wives, submit yourselves to your own husbands as you do to the Lord.” Ephesians 5:21-22</p> <p>“Husbands, love your wives, just as Christ loved the church and gave himself up for her.” Ephesians 5:25</p> <p>“Husbands, in the same way be considerate as you live with your wives, and treat them with respect as the weaker partner and as heirs with you of the gracious gift of life, so that nothing will hinder your prayers.” 1 Peter 3:7</p>
<p>“Follow the commands of the husband like a slave; dread your husband's heart for fear of otherwise being insulted or beaten;</p>	<p>“A wife of noble character who can find? She is worth far more than rubies. Her husband has full confidence in her and lacks nothing of value. She brings him good, not harm, all the days of her life.</p>

⁴⁶ The mothers might not know the exact wording, but the meaning as it has been passed on from their mothers.

<p>cook well and never dare to eat until your husband returns home; suppress your emotions to avoid the risk of having your husband insult you; even if your husband has a terrible temper, you must never dare to reply” (Zimmermann 1994:26).</p> <p>The woman is instructed to work hard and not be lazy. She has to be able to run her household well, to cook, clean and serve guests. Apart from her household chores, she should do some manual work like weaving or knitting (Mai [s a]:2).</p>	<p>She selects wool and flax and works with eager hands [...]. She gets up while it is still night; she provides food for her family and portions for her female servants [...]. She sees that her trading is profitable, and her lamp does not go out at night. In her hand she holds the distaff and grasps the spindle with her fingers [...]. She is clothed with strength and dignity; she can laugh at the days to come. She speaks with wisdom, and faithful instruction is on her tongue. She watches over the affairs of her household and does not eat the bread of idleness [...]. Charm is deceptive, and beauty is fleeting; but a woman who fears the Lord is to be praised. Honor her for all that her hands have done, and let her works bring her praise at the city gate.” Proverbs 31:10-31</p>
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Table 2: Women in the *chbab srey* vs. Bible

Both teach that the wife should submit to her husband as well as to work hard for the family, yet in completely different ways. While similar outwardly, the underlying values and attitudes differ greatly. According to the *chbab srey*, the wife is to be subservient, whereas the husband can do as he pleases. On the other hand, submission in the Bible is based on mutual love and respect. The wife is equally valued and her hard work is honoured, not just taken for granted. It has been shown that Cambodian women, particularly those in rural areas and with low education, are still very much influenced by the traditional gender attitudes and relations, passed on from generation to generation. This female ideal can cause shame and guilt when women are mistreated by their husbands, as they see it as result of not being able to fully please him and therefore deserved.

The message of the gospel contrasts greatly to the above. Jesus has come to set the oppressed free (Luke 4:18). In Christ we are a new creation, reconciled to God through Christ (2 Corinthians 5:17-18). This is a very important message for the Cambodian women (as for everyone else). It can give them a new perspective. They are no longer in bondage to human beings, but belong to God (1 Corinthians 7:22-23) as his beloved daughters (1 John 3:1). This gives them value, which is no longer dependent on what they do, or how well they please their husbands. However, as long as this message does

not directly affect their daily lives and struggles, it cannot set them free. Fabella (1989:10) states that in her own culture, the Philippines,

not many women would be familiar with the figure of a liberating or liberated Jesus, They know him as the suffering or crucified Jesus who understands their own suffering which they passively or resignedly endure. Many remain unaware of their class and gender oppression and simply live on with a 'status quo' christology. Nevertheless, an increasing number of women are becoming aware of our subordinate place and exploited state in a patriarchal church and society, and see this as contrary to the will of a just and loving God, who created both men and women in God's own image. As these women strive to change this inequitable situation within the overall struggle against economic, political and social injustices, they, too, see Jesus as their hope and liberator.

I imagine that also in Cambodia there are many Christian women, who continue living in the 'status quo', submitting and enduring silently and have not yet experienced Jesus as their hope and liberator in relation to their situation of discrimination and injustice. But this is not what God intended for them. Helping them to determine “the emancipating and enslaving elements” (Fabella 1989:11) of their culture and beliefs can make them aware of the gender inequality and injustice as opposed to God's plan. Patriarchal structures and discrimination of women might also be found in the Christian church as it is influenced by the culture. These structures and elements which are not according to God's plan need to be addressed so that people can be set free and empowered to bring about change, not only for the women's situation but also for impacting society.

It is part of the mothers' tasks to pass on cultural ideals of female behaviour to their daughters. They therefore play a crucial part in shaping how the role of women in the next generation is defined, not only through their influence on the daughters but also on the sons, whose perception of women determines the way they will relate to their wife and other women in their family, like sisters or daughters, as well as how they value women in general. A change towards a Biblical view of women's roles can impact the whole society, improving the situation of many women.

This impact is not limited to the children. The substance of the *chbab srey*, has been deeply ingrained in the thinking of Khmer women for so long: it takes a long time to change thinking patterns that are so deeply rooted. But Jesus can break these bonds and

set women free. And women who have experienced this can pass it on, which leads to the next point.

5.2.3 Sharing with other women

Sharing testimonies

It is very common for Cambodians to sit together and talk, in the shade under their houses built on stilts, at the market and on other different occasions, talking about life, what is happening and so on. Spirits, fear of spirits and religious practices play an important part in the lives of Khmer people and provide a good connecting point for Christian women to share with others about their faith, what Jesus has done in their lives, how they have become free from their fear of spirits and so on. They all have something to share because they have experienced Jesus in their lives. Many have testimonies of healing, protection and how God answered their prayers. They have a new hope despite the difficulties they might face in their lives.

The testimonies of local women are in many ways more powerful than those of people coming from outside, such as missionaries. The listeners might at first be more attracted by a missionary because they are curious and everything that is new and different seems interesting. But a missionary cannot speak into their lives in the way a local person does. Even after living in Cambodia for a long time, speaking the local language and being culturally well adapted, missionaries are still different, their living situation is different, their background is different and so on. They will never be able to understand the situation of the locals as well as a local does and might also not be fully trusted by the locals. By contrast, the local women know the daily reality of life in the village, they face similar struggles and therefore their testimony can speak much better into the situation of other women, as it is more relevant, and the listeners can relate to it much better. Moreover, they not only hear, but can actually see the proof the life of the Christian woman, so that what she is saying are not just words. This does not mean that missionaries should not give testimonies - those have their place too. However, they cannot replace the testimony of a local.

How can Khmer women be encouraged and empowered to share their testimonies with people who have not heard the gospel yet? First, they need to be aware that they have something to share and that their testimony can make a difference. It can further be helpful to identify connecting factors that they can link their testimony with, because one of the biggest challenges might be how to start. This can happen, for example, by determining common things that people usually talk about and finding ways to link the testimony to them. Preparing the testimony beforehand helps them to be ready to share when an opportunity comes up, as well as keeps them focused on the main points. They can practise in small groups with other Christians until they become more confident in sharing.

Storytelling

Stories are an effective way to share the gospel and is very appropriate in Cambodia, an oral culture, with many illiterate people, especially in the rural areas. Wiebe (2011:127) concludes from his research that the Good News needs to be communicated mainly in story form and argues that evangelistic preaching should mainly be based on biblical stories and testimonies. Bible story telling is being used by different mission organisations in Cambodia, including OMF. It is also a biblical model – Jesus often used stories. Most people like to listen to stories, even if they might not be interested in the Bible. Everyone can learn to tell stories: one does not need to be literate, nor a good public speaker; it is possible for introverts as well as extroverts (Dillon 2012: Loc. 133).

Cambodian women in rural areas, who are the focus of this research, generally have low education and are often illiterate or partly literate, which affects their ability to read the Bible. But stories can be learned in groups, with those who are literate reading them out loud, and there are also recordings of the whole Bible available in Khmer. Using questions to reflect on the story and discuss it in the group furthers their understanding of the story and how it applies to their lives. The process of learning to tell stories also helps them to learn more from the Bible themselves.

Testimonies as well as telling Bible stories are effective ways for the rural Khmer women to communicate the gospel along the lines of their natural relationships - other

women, their children and the extended family.

5.2.4 Impact on the household

As managers of the household, the tasks and responsibilities of a wife are various and also involve decision-making. So she handles the family finances and decides how the money is to be spent, including decisions on education of the children, which often takes up a considerable part of the family expenses. Many women decide by themselves about their own healthcare (see chapter 3.3.5), so they are free to decide whether to go to the local witch doctor or to the health centre. Through this involvement in decisions about financial matters, the wife can have an active part in setting priorities for the family. A Christian wife can set a good example by, for example, not going to the witch doctor - which can further save a lot of money since they often have to pay a lot for offerings; not gambling away the household money, but instead set money aside for the children's education and so on.

Despite the requirement of being submissive, the wife also advises her husband and assists him in his endeavours. I know of some families where the wife became a Christian first. The reactions of the husbands ranged from opposition to acceptance. But some of them finally became Christians themselves through the influence of their wife, often as a result of seeing how God answered prayers or experiencing how God was working in their own lives after being prayed for. Sometimes misconceptions about Christianity are reasons for opposition, especially, as it is often argued, that it is a 'foreign' religion and destroys traditional values. Once people learn more about the truth of Christianity, these objections might vanish. The advice in 1 Peter 3:1-2 fits well into the Cambodian context: "Wives, in the same way submit yourselves to your own husbands so that, if any of them do not believe the word, they may be won over without words by the behavior of their wives, when they see the purity and reverence of your lives".

5.2.5 Prayer

The importance of prayer needs to be mentioned, too. In the Christian family, there will

be regular prayers for the children, the family and for activities mentioned above.

Besides that, in the Cambodian context, prayer that addresses the middle level is very significant, such as prayer for healing, as sickness is understood to have a spiritual cause. Many people started believing because they were healed or saw someone else healed after being prayed for. Khmer are usually willing to be prayed for and even though they might be sceptical against Christianity, most of them readily let it happen when asked if they would like to be prayed for. This way they begin to experience God's power in their own lives.

To conclude, even though most rural Khmer women will probably never take up any official leading position or be especially noticed in public, it has been shown that they have great potential to significantly influence Cambodia with the gospel message. In a quiet way, mostly in the background, by sharing her life and faith in her household and social environment, a Christian woman can make a notable difference and help shape Cambodian society in a positively different way.

6. CONCLUSIONS

6.1 Designing a mission strategy

In the previous chapter, I discussed how rural Khmer women have had influence on forming religious identity and I then made some suggestions about how their influence could be strengthened. I will now take up these points to design a mission strategy which aims to empower these women to use their natural influence to communicate the gospel.

In line with the title of this study, I will focus on the influence of Cambodian women on religious formation. However, in order to really empower Cambodian women, and also attitudes within the Christian church, it would be important to tackle more widely the cultural values which are discriminating and against the egalitarian nature of men and women as created in God's image.

Raising awareness

Women have significant influence on their children in shaping their worldview and values from an early age, as they are the main person of reference and model. It is likely that most of the time they are not doing that consciously. As has been shown, there seems to be not much intentional teaching for the younger children, apart from telling them not to do this or that; nonetheless children learn from what they see their mother (and others) doing, such as how she reacts to situations and so on. In order to strengthen this influence, people need to be aware of it.

On the one hand, this is important for the women themselves that they realise the impact they have through the example they are to their children, as well as the responsibility that goes with it.

On the other hand, it is also important for the church and especially the pastors and leaders to recognise this, not only because it might change their perception of the role of women and cause them to place a higher value on it, but also because they can be more intentional in helping to prepare the women for this task through teaching, training and equipping.

*Evangelizing through chronological Bible storying*⁴⁷

As mentioned in the previous chapter, storytelling is a suitable way for women to share the gospel with their family and social contacts. In order to be able to understand the significance of the salvation of Jesus, people need to understand who God is - the creator and sustainer of everything - and the problem of sin, that there is no way to save ourselves. For that reason it is important to start with creation and the fall. A glimpse into God's history with Israel further demonstrates God's faithfulness to his promises on the one hand and Israel's failures and inability to save themselves on the other hand. Dillon (2012: Loc. 309) points out that “[t]he length of the story of people's failures emphasizes that only a new heart and new life from God will ever change our rebellious nature. There is no other way. The lengthy story prepares us for the relief and joy of God's grace in Jesus”. Without this preparation, Cambodians with a background of folk-Buddhism, who are used to having many gods, might just add Jesus as one more to the number. Chronological Bible storying is therefore a good way to help them understand the Biblical background, until the story gets to Jesus.

Stories of Jesus' ministry on earth further illustrate his power on different levels: stories of Jesus healing the sick or casting out demons address the middle level, proclaiming his authority over the spirits and evil forces. Stories of Jesus forgiving sin or raising people from the dead show his power over sin and death, which answer questions that belong to the upper level. His authority over nature is, for example, shown in the calming of the storm (Luke 8:22-25) and that addresses the lower level.

Story groups

Story groups can serve two purposes for those who attend: to grow in faith and in the knowledge of God as well as to learn to tell stories to share with others.

Listening to and discussing a story in a small group helps people to learn from the biblical examples and apply it to their lives. They get personally involved as contrasted with preaching, where they are mostly passive listeners. Through questions, they are

⁴⁷ My concept of Bible storying is strongly influenced by Christine Dillon (cf Dillon 2009 and 2012), a fellow OMFer, after attending two weeks of training led by her and other OMFers. The course is known as “Multiplying Effective Evangelists and Disciplers” (MEED), intended by OMF International for Member Development. As a result I started using storytelling in my ministry.

challenged to reflect on the story and find out how it speaks into their personal situation, rather than just accepting the application presented by the pastor or leader as 'the right one'. In this way, God can speak to them individually, as they need it, in their present situation, which is different for each person. A fixed set of questions which can be applied generally for any story helps to make it more reproducible. A possible set of questions, adapted from Dillon (2012: Loc. 2057) includes:

1. What do you like about this story?
2. What questions do you have about this story?
3. What can we learn about people in this story?
4. What can we learn about God / Jesus / the Holy Spirit in this story?
5. What would you like to do or change in your life this week because of this story?
6. Who would you like to tell this story to this week?

The form of the questions might need to be adjusted to the audience. The questions above seem to work well for some groups in Cambodia, for others, such as the women's group I am involved in, especially questions three and four are difficult to understand. But asking different questions to review the content usually helps them to get to those points. It is important to include questions that help them apply the story. In my experience, asking if something similar happened in their situation is often a good way to make that bridge.

When the women are asked the same questions again and again, with every new story, they will memorise them and can also apply them to other stories.

In the small groups women can also learn and practice to tell the stories themselves in order to then share it with others. The children might be a good audience to practice telling their story to outside the group, as this is probably less threatening than telling them to other people and especially to non-Christians. This way, the mothers gain confidence and the children get to know the story. In the small groups there is some accountability, which might help the women to overcome their fear and nervousness to practice their story and they can encourage each other.

Stories of women in the Bible can further serve as examples for women to make

them aware of “their participation in God's mission and their contributions to history” (Kwok 2000:53) and help them see that they are part of God's bigger plan.

The process of learning and telling a story again and again helps to internalise it. This can also be used intentionally. Sarah Ardu⁴⁸, for example, is part of a story group, the purpose of which is discipleship. In a meeting when they learn a new story, they just practise retelling it. Then, during the week, every member of the group is required to tell the story to five different people. In the next meeting as a group, they first repeat the story again before they discuss it. This repetition in the group helps the members become aware of things that they might have ignored or misunderstood when telling the story during the week and deepen their comprehension. The focus of these groups is on spiritual growth of the participants rather than on the effect that the story might have on the people they tell it to.

This seems a good way to internalise scripture and to grow in the understanding of God. And again, anyone can be part of such a group, also illiterate people. It does require long-term commitment of the participants though, which might be difficult in a rural context, especially during the planting and harvest seasons.

Addressing cultural beliefs and values

Cultural worldview and values need to be addressed, particularly those which are opposed to what the Bible teaches, and to be replaced by biblical values. Stories are a non-threatening way to do that, as N.T. Wright, biblical scholar and theologian points out:

Stories are, actually, particularly good at modifying or subverting other stories and their worldviews. Where a head-on attack would certainly fail, the parable hides the wisdom of the serpent behind the innocence of the dove, gaining entrance and favor which can then be used to change assumptions which the hearer would otherwise keep hidden for safety (quoted in Dillon 2012: Loc. 240).

What needs special mentioning here with regard to women in Cambodia is the traditional cultural image of them as influenced by Buddhist views and the *chbab srey*,

48 Sarah Ardu has been a missionary to Cambodia since 1998. She has used storytelling for many years and also runs workshops for Khmer as well as for missionaries, to train them in the art of storytelling. See website URL: cambodiadream.info for more information about her ministry. Sarah told me about the discipleship groups in a personal conversation.

which not only seems to be a major obstacle to realising gender equality in Cambodia and to successfully fight domestic violence (JICA 2007:10; 43; MoWA 2008:2), but women may also not be able to really experience freedom in Christ as long as they are bound to these cultural norms. To empower the women it is therefore paramount to replace the cultural view with God's view of them, who are his daughters, created in his image, equally valued as men, righteous before God because Jesus paid for their sin, loved and worthy because of who they are, not because of what they do.

There are many other aspects in the Khmer worldview that need to be addressed, but they will not be mentioned here. Replacing these unbiblical values and beliefs with those that are pleasing God is a lifelong process.

Sharing their personal stories

It is typically encouraging to hear how other people have experienced God. It helps a person to see God at work here and now, not just somewhere far away, and can cause the hearer to want to experience this God, too. Everyone who lives a life with God has something to share.

It is good to institutionalise regular times to share testimonies for mutual encouragement for the believers. For the women, who often have low self-esteem and think they have nothing to contribute, they can see that they actually do have something to say because God is working uniquely in their lives. This can give them more confidence to share their stories also with others, who do not know the saviour yet. Beyond sharing testimony within the local church, they should be strongly encouraged to share in all situations and places.

Focus on prayer

Prayer is very powerful. Only in connection with Jesus can his followers do the works he sent them to do and he promises that he will answer their prayers (John 14:12-13; 15:5-7). Every believer can experience that. Through answered prayers, God's power becomes visible, helping people to trust him in other areas of life, too. It also shows that God cares for them personally.

Regular prayer times in groups, in the family and individually should be encouraged,

becoming not only a good habit, but also as an example for the children. The prayer practice of their mothers can further teach them where to turn to for help but also where the blessings come from.

All these points are generally applicable, not just for women, but they address their special needs in the sense that they focus on their individual involvement and the contribution that they can make to advance the kingdom of God in Cambodia and in helping them overcome feelings of inferiority or inadequacy caused by traditional social norms but now embracing their identity in Christ.

6.2 Final thoughts

Despite the fact that men and women are equal before the Cambodian law, in traditional Khmer thinking they are not. The findings suggest that the traditional ideal of women rooted in the *chbab srey* is a major impediment for gender equality to be realised in Cambodia. Its image of women is opposed to how God made them to be. I believe that the Cambodian church can make a significant difference by intentionally addressing this distorted picture and the accompanying values and replacing them with biblical ones. A Christian response targeting and removing ideals rooted in the *chbab srey* will not only help to improve the situation of many women, but also increase the social relevance of the Christian church and what the gospel means practically. The shape of this response could be subject for further research.

Different mission organisations and Christian groups in Cambodia are using chronological Bible storytelling, including OMF. It is very suitable for the rural Khmer context and reproducible as it does not need especially educated people, but anyone can learn to tell stories. I have been using storytelling for about two years now and with the women's group at the church in the village, this has been my main approach since the group was started a bit more than a year ago. However, when I started this research, I did not have the assumption that it will lead me to an approach based on storytelling, but based on the findings of this thesis this seems to be the most appropriate way to

strengthen the influence of the women. This outcome confirmed me in what I am doing and also challenged me to use storytelling even more intentionally in order to prepare the women for their important contribution to reaching Cambodia with the gospel.

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