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Concerning the education of children in contemporary rural Cambodia Filial debt, deference and “vagabondage” for boys and girls

Steven Prigent¹

Abstract

This article gives an account of the “moral economy” shared by Cambodian farmers regarding the subject of education, by highlighting on one hand the importance that the parents place on filial debt and on respect for the hierarchy of the ages, and on the other hand the educational prudence which they show with regard to children’s sociability. Secondly, the article historicises this moral economy by studying the institutional and the informal forms of education of the village children during the 20th century, with particular attention paid at gender differences. As a third point, the text deals more particularly with the issue of state schooling, which is being imposed with more and more application in the educational lives of the children in rural Cambodia. Finally, this study bears witness to a contemporary weakening of the relation of deference between the generations where the context is one of the international promotion of the consumer society, of a salaried working class of young single people, of democratic educational and children’s empowerment global values. This article aims firstly at giving a “general view” of the Khmer peasant educational system, but it also examines the meaning which the notion of filial debt is acquiring in a differentiated manner according to gender in contemporary, rural Cambodia.

Keywords: Cambodia, education, childhood, gender

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Résumé

Cet article vise tout d'abord à rendre compte de l'économie morale partagée par les riziculteurs cambodgiens en matière d'éducation, puis à historiciser cette économie morale en étudiant les formes institutionnelles et informelles de l'éducation des enfants du village durant le xx^e siècle. Dans un troisième temps, l'article porte plus particulièrement sur l'enjeu de la scolarisation étatique, qui s'impose de plus en plus sérieusement dans la vie éducative des enfants de riziculteurs khmers. Enfin, cette étude témoigne d'un affaiblissement contemporain de la relation de révérence entre les âges, dans un contexte de promotion internationale de la société de consommation, du salariat ouvrier des jeunes célibataires, et de valeurs éducatives démocratiques et d'empowerment des enfants. Ce travail décrit et analyse le système éducatif des paysans cambodgiens, et interroge le sens que prend le sentiment de dette filiale dans le Cambodge rural contemporain, d'une façon différenciée selon les genres.

Mots-clés : Cambodge, éducation, enfance, genres

**Photo 1 - Cheung Kok village during the rainy season
(cliché Antoine Guide)**

In 1991, after twenty years of civil war (including four years of disaster under the Khmer Rouge) and following the collapse of the Soviet bloc, the signing of the Paris peace agreements marked the beginning of a reconstruction period for Cambodian society. The United Nations organised the 1993 elections and opened the way for numerous bilateral, multilateral and “non-governmental” agencies to set up development projects in the name of human rights and democracy. The borders were opened up to the market economy; the expansion of the industrial sector and the increase in “pressure on the land” (Pillot, 2008) led to an intensification in the relationship between towns and rural areas, and saw the emergence of an urbanised middle class;

television, internet and mobile phones connected Cambodian rice farmers to the globalised world. At the beginning of the 2000s, even though the population of Cambodia were still mainly peasants, they were no longer grouped as they had been for so long, in a society of hamlets within networks of monasteries (Ovesen, Trankell and Öjendal, 1996).

Cheung Kok is a village of Khmer rice farmers located eight kilometres from Kompong Cham, which is a small provincial town in Cambodia, which the Mekong river runs through. I have carried out research there on a regular basis since January 2008 and I have a particular ethnographic interest in the education of the village children. The aim of this article is to give an account of the moral economy² shared by the people of Cheung Kok regarding the subject of education, by highlighting on one hand the importance that the parents of the village place on filial debt and on respect for the hierarchy of the ages, and on the other hand the educational prudence which they show with regard to children's sociability. This sociability of "vagabondage" poses a problem, as much from the "vernacular" point of view as from the theoretical. Secondly, the article historicises this moral economy by studying the institutional and the informal forms of education of the village children during the 20th century, with particular attention paid at gender differences.³ As a third point, the text deals more particularly with the issue of state schooling, which is being imposed with more and more application in the educational lives of the Cheung Kok children. Finally, this study bears witness to a contemporary weakening of the relation of deference between the generations in Cheung Kok where the context is one of the international promotion of the consumer society, of a salaried working class of young single people, of democratic educational and children's empowerment global values. This article aims firstly at giving a "general view" of the Khmer peasant educational system, but it also examines the meaning which the notion of filial debt is acquiring in a differentiated manner according to gender in contemporary, rural Cambodia.

2. The recourse, here, to the concept of moral economy, is done with a view to being more specific and to problematise further than the vague concept of "cultural representations" insofar as it allows us to have a more precise focus on the "political" dimension of the education of Cambodian children (morality here being understood in the sense of Foucault's governmentality). Here I have adopted the conceptualisation proposed by Didier Fassin which brings together values, norms and moral feelings, which does not restrict itself just to the question of domination and resistance and yet does not ignore the important political dimension of the concept (Eideliman and Fassin, 2012: 9-47).

3. On the topic of gender in Cambodia, see the works of Judy Ledgerwood (1990) and Annuska Derks (2008).

I - The problem of the “child-vagabond”, a peasant moral economy of education

In Khmer, the word for “child” is *kūn kmeñ*. In Cheung Kok parlance the term *kūn* is used independently of the term *kmeñ* in situations where the speaker seeks to emphasise the filial attachment of the child (my child, his child, etc.). The term *kūn* serves in fact to designate “progeniture, grandchildren” (*kūn cau*), the “son in law” or the “daughter in law” (*kūn prasā*), the “oldest of the siblings” (*kūn cpañ*) or the “youngest” (*kūn bau*). From a semantic and pragmatic point of view the term *kūn* signifies the filial attachment of someone and it can be translated as “child of”. This term also designates who is young and dependent on a superior element, known as “mother” (*me*). Thus, a pawn in chess (*kūn ‘uk*), a key (*kūn so*), a person in debt (*kūn paññul*), a workman (*kūn jāñ*), or even a subaltern in a military context (*kūn dāhān*), a police officer (*kūn pūlis*) or in banditry (*kūn cor*), are related respectively to the queen on a chessboard, the lock, the money lender, the site manager or a leader in the military, the police or in a gang (*me*). Village leaders are called *me bhūmi*, and the terminological couple *me/kūn* qualifies more generally a relationship of patronage (Ovesen, Trankell and Ojendal, 1996: 86; Davis, 2008: 230). If the word *kūn* means the feeling of filial attachment, it therefore also covers the meaning of subordinate dependence. When the term *kmeñ* is used independently from the term *kūn*, it means “this child” and more widely a young person. Its etymology tells us that it was formed from the old Khmer *kanmeñ* which means “who is young, younger than, inferior; who serves others” (Lewitz-Pou, 1992: 76). Moreover, the old Khmer legal codes as well as the practices for binding in debt establish a certain closeness between the status of child and that of slave (Leclere, 1898: 404; Martin, 1998: 285-314). In Khmer, the term “child” (*kūn kmeñ*) therefore signifies an inferior position and filial dependency.

To this idea of subaltern inferiority is added another one of an incompleteness. In Cheung Kok, children are said to be “immature” (*kmeñ khcī, kmeñ lhak’*), as opposed to the term “mature” (*dum*) which is used for old people (*cās’ dum*). It is also said that children are “incomplete, insufficient” (*sdoer*), a term that is also used to denote, in a reproachful tone, an immature adolescent, irresponsible, a bit of an “idiot”. Parents reckon that it is around the age of 6 or 7 that children reach “the age of reason” (*tiñ ktī*). When a child attains this stage of maturity “he knows the difference between right and wrong”. He knows how to think, how to memorise and “has self-awareness” (*vā tiñ khluon vā*). “He knows that in this house you must say *grandfather* and that in that house you must say *younger aunt*”. “You are supposed to know how to recognise those who are junior, the young, the old”. Indeed, mastering

the terminological hierarchy of age represents a stage in maturity in childhood and reflects the principle of birth right which has a predominant place in social organisation in south-east Asia (Condominas, 1983: 56; Formoso, 1990: 75-76). When a child reaches the “age of reason” he begins to master Khmer terminology of address and reference between elders and juniors⁴, and he has acquired the beginning of moral feeling and is becoming responsible. He can begin to contribute to the family economy particularly in carrying out jobs of “keeping watch and surveillance” (*moel*) of younger children and herds of animals.⁵ While puberty is marked by the term *jamdañ*, the end of childhood corresponds in a more concrete manner to entry into nobility, known as “full age” (*beñ vāy*; *grap’ āyu*). Around the age of sixteen the children become “young nubile men » (*kmeñ kaṃloḥ*) and “young nubile women” (*kmeñ kramuṃ*). They have reached “marriageable age” (*beñ kār*). Marriage then puts an end to “the age of youth” (*vāy kmeñ*) and the person enters into the “age of maturity” (*vāy cās*’).

**Photo 2 - Naga ask forgiveness to their parents
(cliché Steven Prigent)**

4. On this point, see the article by Anne Guillou (1999) that examines this terminological architecture.

5. For comparison, Alma Gottlieb states that it is around the age of 5 or 6 that Ifaluk children in Micronesia acquire a moral sense (2000: 372). This matches the results of a study by Barbara Rogoff et al. (1975), which shows that in many countries, the period between 5 and 7 corresponds to the age when children become responsible: they take care of younger children, and animals and carry out many domestic chores.

1 - Filial debt

In Cheung Kok, parents consider that they have gained merits (*gun*) by taking care of their children and by working hard to feed them. “Parents accumulate infinite merits (*anantagun*) [...], because they gave us life and then raised us to adulthood” an old lady in the village explained. Children then have to understand that they “bear a debt” (*tin gun*) towards their parents and they have to “pay back these merits” (*tap snan san gun*). Moreover, it is because they have not accumulated enough merits that the children cannot “expect” cremation (*pūjā*).⁶ “Under the age of 16 there is no double funeral (*loek*).” “He hasn’t helped out yet, he hasn’t done anything really useful.” “He hasn’t yet accumulated any merits [...], that’s why we can bury him”. “He hasn’t had enough time to do any ‘bad deeds’ (*pāp*)”, “He hasn’t yet acquired any bad karma (*at’ dān’ mān kamm bīer*)”.

6. The usual funeral ritual for Buddhist people, allowing for the “transfer of merits” (*pañsukūl*) and rebirth. For further information about funerals in Khmer Buddhism, see the work of the ethnologists François Bizot (1976, 1981) and John Clifford Holt (2012).

Photos 3 et 4 - Watching the herds of animals (clichés Steven Prigent)

For the children, one of the first ways of acquiring merits in order to testify to their debt towards their parents consists in contributing to the family economy, particularly by watching over and supervising (*moel*) younger children or herds of animals. After that, monastic ordination and marriage are the traditional institutional means which allow them to “return the merits” to their parents, although monastic ordination has become much less of a practice since the 1970s. It is when they reach marriageable age that children begin to accomplish sufficient “merits” (*guṇ*) in order to testify to their debt towards their parents (*saṅ guṇ*, *tap snaṅ saṅ guṇ*), and that they can “claim” cremation if they die. Pious people who are more sensitive to religious doctrine reckon that it is nevertheless impossible to “totally pay back” (*saṅ*) merits and that these can only be “partially paid back” (*tap*). “Parents’ merits are so numerous that they cannot be counted”. “It is impossible to totally pay off one’s debt, parents’ merits are too heavy, there is nothing to equal them.” “The merits that they have accumulated in giving birth [to a human form] with hands, legs, eyes, a nose, all that and which has grown until he has reached the age of reason, those are enormous merits, you can’t pay off such a debt.”⁷ “You

7. Guṇ tael gāt’ kham prīṇ paṅka paṅkoet jā rūp, tīṇ ktī, mǎn tǎi mǎn joeṇ avayava:, bhnaek cramuh sabv paep sabv yāñ, guṇ dhān’ šī saṅ at’ pān.

(westerners) put your children in homes at the age of five months so it's not surprising that they put you in homes when you get old." This was explained to me by Dyla, my transcriber assistant, to illustrate the importance in her eyes of filial debt as well as the reciprocity that it implies ("I worked hard to raise you, you will work hard to take care of me").

According to Grégory Kourilsky, who has studied the historical process by which the term *gun* has passed from the meaning of "quality" to that of "debt", this term has acquired a new dimension "by its inclusion in a large number of vernacular expressions which generally refer to the idea of gratitude or a duty of obligation" (2007: 30-31). According to him, the *gun* applied by Theravada Buddhism are to be understood on three levels: "they designate the 'merits' or the 'merits' of the parents who gave birth to the child, took care of him and educated him; the organic "components", solids and liquids, of the father and the mother, passed into the individual's body during pregnancy; the "duty of obligation" that this person, by these very facts, has contracted with the parents. This last interpretation, unknown to the Indian exegeses, seems to be original to south east Asia" (2007: 40). These findings reflect the work done by Alain Testart who, in the framework of an anthropology of relational forms of dependency highlights the structural strength of debt in south east Asia as being closely linked to the cult of the ancestor (Testart, 2006: 80-81)⁸, including the Chinese influence of Confucianism. While it might be agreed that if the strength of the sense of debt in filiation is not regionally specific, south east Asian societies have institutionalised this debt and have made it an explicit moral obligation, particularly regarding education.

In Cheung Kok childhood is thus marked by the sign of dependency, filial debt and hierarchical inferiority. For the parents, the rationale behind education consists in making the child obey the rules of filial duty and the Buddhist accomplishment of "merits" (*gun*), and this in the framework of a relation of deference between younger and older generations. The children of the village are absolutely the youngest people. And they are expected to bend and bow down ('*on*') when they pass their elders, especially in the case of teachers at school. These teachers are known as *grū*, a term derived from the Sanskrit *guru*, which means the master of knowledge. The status of school teacher is that of a hierarchical superior who the pupils must take as a role model and towards whom they must display respect and deference (*gorab; tññ gun*).⁹ The didactics and pedagogy inherited from religious teaching carried

8. See also the works of the ethnologist Richard Pottier a specialist of Laos, who highlights the structural weight of debt as the foundation of the cult of the ancestor (2012: 205).

9. The Ministry of Education, in partnership with national television channels, has produced several moralising videos in the last few years, reminding young high school students that their teachers are "like their parents", that they should only be concerned about their future, they should work hard and not

out in pagodas over the centuries, oblige children to learn to read, write and count by heart. It is repetitious work with minutely detailed copying. The use of the cane for punishment (*rambāt*) is the norm in homes as well as in the classroom, reminding the child of the rules of filial debt and deference.

2 - Child “vagabondage”

When the children of Cheung Kok go “vagabond” (*toer leñ*), to a certain extent they escape this vertical relationship. They are no longer moving on family territory, they no longer contribute to the family economy, they are no longer at school; they take part in a form of social life that is outside the three educational spheres. In a general sense, the expression *toer leñ* means “walking about for pleasure, with no particular aim or reason”. In fact, although the term *leñ* means “to play” when it is used separately from another verb, when it follows a first verb it means that the action undertaken is an end in itself. Thus “to speak” (*niyāy*) becomes “to speak – to play” (*niyāy leñ*), which we might translate as “speaking for pleasure, chatting”; and “to walk” (*toer*) becomes “to walk – to play” (*toer leñ*), which could be translated as “walking for pleasure with no particular reason, to stroll”. For the linguist Joseph Deth Thach, *leñ* “deteleonomises” the verb which precedes it (2010: 194). From this point of view, “vagabondage” (*toer leñ*) characterises an action deprived of any purpose.

From the point of view of the parents of Cheung Kok, the fact that their children “go vagabond” is quite risky. The following idiomatic expressions demonstrate it: this sociability encourages an “association” (between children) (*seb gap*) which may lead to a “[bad] habit” (*dhlāp*) and cause the child to “lose his mind; or ramble” (*vak*; *tapāe lae*); to lose himself in a game (*vā jak’ leñ vā*), to “have restless sleep” (*mamoe mamai*) and “to not sleep enough”, (*tek min skap’ skal*, *tek min ch’aet*), to “forget his home” (*bhlec phdah*), to “forget mealtimes” (*bhlec pāy bhlec dīk*), to “leave behind the family territory” (*gmān goltau*), to become “brutal and depraved” (*bāl*; *bālo*), and at the age of a young unmarried person, to become a true “vagabond” (*toer leñ pōlae*; *toer leñ āvāsae*). The word *āvāsae*, from the Sanskrit *āvāsa* “independent, free” denotes an individual with no attachments, no home, a wanderer and it has taken on a very pejorative connotation (Lewitz-Pou, 1974: 159). This term is often used to describe children who have broken the filial link and who are organised in gangs that roam the streets of the capital.¹⁰ This lexical field of

complain and that they will regret disrespecting their teacher and not having listened the day when he or she falls ill, while the young people will go on to become accomplished adults.

10. “Street children” are mainly located in the capital Phnom Penh and towns such as Kompong Som and Siem Reap, as the rest of the country remains countryside with small cities. Some information can be

vagabondage is completed by the more formal and legal term *anāthā*, which can be rendered as “rootless vagabond, outlaw, with no fixed abode”. Finally, when children spend their time roaming around, parents reckon that long exposure to the heat of the sun or to the humidity of the rain damages their health. In brief, from the perspective of the parents, children’s vagabondage runs the risk of endangering the filial link (and their health).

Moreover, when children roam around they are seen as being unproductive. We find this idea in the work of Jacqueline Rabain carried out in an African society where children who were involved little in the family economy are called “home breakers” (1979: 234). For the parents in the village of Cheung Kok, a child’s ability to accomplish productive tasks is important from a short term economic point of view and also because this means that a child can achieve Buddhist merits (*gun*), but this also depends on his future value on the marriage market because it forges his reputation. A young person of marriageable age who spends his/her time roaming damages his/her reputation and his/her family’s and does not position himself/herself well concerning his/her future nuptials. “The parent’s face is as big as a thumb” it is said in such circumstances. This is even more true for girls whose “matrimonial value”¹¹ remains to be evaluated and who are obliged to respect the Khmer ideal of the “woman bearing virtues” (*srī grap’ lakkh[ṇ]*) – a point to which we shall return later.

For all these reasons, in Cheung Kok, it is still very common, through educational prudence, to place a negative accent on the social time of “vagabondage” and this is particularly emphasised when girls are concerned. When children wander around they occupy an uncertain moral margin and are almost *outlaws* regarding their parents. And yet, as the child grows up and away from his mother, it is normal that he turns to companions of his own age and shares a certain kind of social life. Children’s “vagabondage” therefore becomes an issue for parents, that is why they endeavour, more or less seriously depending on the family, to stifle an overlarge vagabondage habit in their children since they fear that this will have repercussions for the young marriageable person. This especially concerns young men, many of whom pay no heed, preferring to drink alcohol and gamble rather than work or study.

found in one piece of research conducted by Anne Guillou on this topic (2009).

11. The price of [mother’s] milk (*thlai dīk ṭoh*) denotes the matrimonial compensation “demanded” (*paṅgāp*) by the young woman’s parents.

3 - Double bind and shutting up the vagabonds

The problem of the child-vagabond, a revealing sign of the moral economy shared by the people of Cheung Kok in matters of education, crystallises a tension and it traps the children of the village in a paradox since they receive the message “you may go roaming knowing that I don’t approve”. The children of Cheung Kok thus find themselves in this educational paradox. It is a *double bind* which can be expressed as follows: “you need to socialise with your peers in order to grow up (move away from us); [but beyond a certain limit] this kind of socialising damages your growing up (do not move away from us).”

From a theoretical point of view and going beyond the specific Khmer culture, this “vernacular” problem bears a certain heuristic potential. Firstly, it makes it possible to reflect on the tension between authority (closing) and *laissez faire* (opening) in the educational relationship and also to examine the child’s wish to reach out to both these points of attraction, whose extreme forms would be subaltern immobility on one hand and vagabond wandering on the other. This problem also allows the positioning of markers of a theoretical reflection consisting in articulating the constructionism of the *Childhood Studies* and the theories of affective maturing (notably psychoanalysis). These theories of affective maturing are reminders of the need, in accompanying a child, not to dissolve the generation order and not to neglect the “limits” that this order “must” impose on the child’s desire to be omnipotent.¹² In fact, rather than considering the former as progressive and the latter as conservative, it seems pertinent to place the concept of the “limit” at the heart of this thinking and to seek to define it in a political perspective of emancipation. Thus, one task for the political philosophy of education could be to define this “beyond a certain limit” which transforms children morally into “vagabonds”. This would include the challenge to theorise the limit without being enclosed in normativity.

From a different point of view, we could assume that modern societies have resolved this problem by “confining child-vagabonds” in institutions which, precisely, keep a watchful eye on children’s sociability in places like schools,

12. Childhood Studies are political sciences to the extent that, being inspired by Michel Foucault’s work, one of their main tasks consists in tracking power exercise over children. They are constructionist to the extent that they highlight the risk of essentializing the age of childhood (enclosing children in the childhood category). This is why there is a possible contradiction with the theories of affective maturing: a reminder of the need for the child to acknowledge generational differences (the Oedipus complex is an obvious example), these theories of affective maturing are normative. However, besides preferring the affective dimension to the cognitive dimension of maturation, I understand it here independently of age (a 50 year old person can be more “immature” than a 25 year old person). This is why the concept of “limit” has to be understood independently of age.

nursery, parks, clubs, and holiday camps. However, in Khmer peasant society the children still enjoy the great freedom of vagabondage even when we take into consideration the few years' ordination as monks, which concerned most boys up until the end of the 1960s. The dialectics of "vagabondage" and of its confinement could therefore contribute to a reflection about modernity and non-modernity in matters of education. From this viewpoint, the international programme Education For All (EFA), which aims to put all Cambodian children in school (and all children in the world), can be considered as a global attempt to control "vagabondage". In any case, the problem of the « child-vagabond » enables us to mitigate the idea of a Khmer cultural specificity, possibly giving way to a rural ecology of mind.

Finally, it must be clear from a terminological point of view that at Cheung Kok the social life of vagabondage remains marked by the hierarchical principle and is little affected by egalitarianism. The term "elder-young ones with the same grandmother" (*pañ p'ūn jī tūn muoy*), which denotes the generational group, by its very semantic composition ("elder-young ones") contains the constituent inequality in the generation group. We can therefore hypothesise that by expressing a reminder of the filial and hierarchical verticality and an educational prudence regarding the horizontality of childhood, the issue of the child-vagabond locks out any possibility of "age group" emerging in Khmer peasant society.¹³

II - A traditional "patriarchal" education

Let us now take the time to historicise the problem of the child-vagabond. Until the end of the 1960s in Cheung Kok most boys left home to go and study for a while in a nearby monastery. Unlike their sisters, they therefore gained experience of a formal education which kept them away from the family environment. Over several months they first joined the monastic order as "pagoda children" (*kmeñ vat*) or "pupil of the monks" (*kūn sis lok*). During this initiation period they had to show their gratitude (*sañ guṇ*) to a master-bonze and assist him during the morning quest for alms (*toer piṇḍ pāt*), by collecting the gifts of food offered daily by the lay population in order to acquire Buddhist merits (*pān puny*). They learned to read and write literary Khmer (which was hardly of any use outside the pagoda) and to recite moral lessons in verse (*cpāp' ker kāl*; *kamṇābs*). These were mainly written in Pali and the pupils learnt them "by heart" (*danteñ*) rarely understanding the

13. On the topic of age groups, see in particular the anthropological work that studies the link between lineage and age group, such as it is presented in *L'Homme* (Peatrick, 1995) going beyond Eisenstadt's theory which states that age groups appear to make up for the weaknesses in lineage (1956).

meaning. This monastic teaching was based on authoritarian pedagogy and repetition and lasted several months (or even several years) until the child was deemed ready for ordination. After having memorised the “ordination prayers” (dharm puos), the children could then enter the monastic order (puos vat).

After the ordination ceremony the boy “acknowledged his debt” (tap snai sañ guṇ) towards his mother (the father being more implicated in the second ordination that cannot take place before the age of twenty). The rite changed him into a dragon (nāg), and he found himself associated with a master – monk (upajjhā) who would ensure his new initiation. He became a novice bonze (ṇen).¹⁴ Through a process of inversion this testimony of filial piety placed the child in a relation of authority regarding his parents since they now would have to honour and respect him (māe ū thvāy paṅgam kūn), as thenceforth he represented the Buddha. He spoke of himself using the term *ātmā*, his parents became *ñom* and addressed him as “Sir, my child” (*lok kūn*). In the name of bearing witness to the filial debt regarding the parents, ordination thus favoured monasteries being substituted for families concerning education, as well as raising sons “above” their parents.

By joining the community of the saṅgha, the novice bonze was following the teachings of Buddha and showing him respect (*thvāy paṅgam*). He had to obey a moral discipline (*vināy*) that was stricter than that imposed on the children in the pagodas and throw himself into learning the *dharma* laws and learning to write Pali. From now on, he had to demonstrate restraint (both verbal and physical), and for him it was forbidden to play, to hunt, to listen to the radio and “to vagabond all around” (*toer hoer tabī tabās*). The novice had to concentrate on studying Buddhist doctrine and to commit himself further to his prayers, which he could say during the morning quest for alms, during feast days and ceremonies (public and private) in order to distribute Buddhist merits to the lay people and to their deceased relatives. This monastic life was only temporary since most children only wore monk’s robes for one or two years, then they were “defrocked” (*sīk*) and they returned to their secular life.

This initiation concerned young men from different villages translated to what Jacques Népote, a historian and ethnologist of Cambodia, defined as being the monasteries’ role as the external “patrilineal” assistant, played out in a context of matrilineal segmentation of the land (1992: 184-186). According to him, the monasteries were veritable reservoirs of single men and they helped

14. For the details about the young boys’ rite of passage, see the work done by Ang Chouléan (2007: 44-50), who mentions in particular that in some regions, the “dragons” undergo several ritual treatments such as “calling their souls” (hau bralṇ), the round of the Brahmin candles (paṇvil babil) and the filing of teeth (dhvœ dhmeñ).

to fabricate these “sons-in-law” destined to occupy a precarious and marginal place regarding the rule of family filiation, which happened to be matrilineal (1992: 152-153). Here we find ourselves in the field of the structural analysis of the rules concerning kinship which it would be interesting to complete by an analysis in terms of “masculine domination” or the “production of great men”¹⁵, or an analysis in terms of “patriarchy”.

Here we must highlight the fact that the question of the mode of filiation in the Khmer kinship system remains in suspense. Partisans of a historicist approach lean towards matrilinearity, while in ethnographic research, filiation appears rather more as a cognatic type.¹⁶ Here we shall just settle for retaining a few points of consensus which mark a certain strength of the feminine in matters of filiation, namely a narrowing of the terminology of kinship focussing on the grandmother, the creation of a category of ancestors (*me pā*) implicated in controlling marriage and the “fertility” of a young girl, a strong tendency, after marriage, towards matrilocality, as well as a preference for the youngest girl in inheritance matters in the parental household.

The education of girls according to the ideal of the woman “bearing virtues”

Whereas the boys were studying at the pagoda, their sisters were growing up inside the family. Ethnological literature relates a rite of “entering into the shadow” (*cūl mlap*) when a girl has her first monthly period. If this rite ever took place in Cheung Kok in past centuries it completely disappeared under the French Protectorate¹⁷. Old women in the village claim to have heard about it but had never experienced it. This rite sometimes set up a marriage scenario since a second bed was made up next to that of the young girl symbolising her future husband. By “leaving the shadow” young girls became “young marriageable women” (*kūn kramum*), they had reached “the fullness of age” (*beñ vǎy*). That said, under the French Protectorate in Cheung Kok the family education of girls was rather more guided by “codes of behaviour for women” (*cpāp’ srī*) and by the ideal of “the woman bearing virtues” (*srī grap’ lakkh[ṇ]*).

Behaviour codes for women were allegedly written in the 19th century by the Illustrious Mai (*paṇḍit mīn mai*) (Pou and Jenner, 1976: 313). Returning to secular life, pious and learned, after having followed Buddhist teaching

15. A classic anthropology exemplified, for example, by the works of Maurice Godelier (2003) or Françoise Héritier (2002).

16. About Khmer kinship, see the works of Judy Ledgerwood (1995), Jacques Népote (1992) and Steven Prigent (2011).

17. Just for the sake of a more complete account we must mention the rite of the « shaving of the quiff » (*kor juk*) which concerned boys and girls around the ages of 7-12 but which has largely become obsolete (Ang, 1994: 160-164; 2006: 41; Porée-Maspero, 1985: 35-37, Martin, 1997: 315 ; Thierry, 1994: 252).

for a number of years, the author was apparently inspired by “ancient codes” (*cpāp’ cās’*) when he wrote this text in verse (Pou and Jenner, 1976: 314). In this gnomic poem, the Illustrious Mai identifies with a mythical mother named Vimala, queen of the Naga, who teaches her daughter the highest moral rules that she should follow when she goes to join her husband Pumaka in the world of men. Four main topics are addressed in this text: the woman’s duty to take care of the home, of her parents and of her husband; the ten kinds of unacceptable behaviour for a woman; the four virtues and the three vices which characterise the woman’s condition; the wife’s duty to never try to appear as her husband’s equal nor to be arrogant with him, even if he behaves unworthily (vulgarity, drunkenness, ignorance, unproductiveness, etc.) In a general manner, these codes stipulate that above all the wife must be concerned for her husband and be devoted to him. The author of these educational poems for young women was a man and for a long time these texts were circulated under the “patriarchal” influence of the monasteries.

At Cheung Kok, the grandparents’ and the parents’ generations have some knowledge of these poems “Of course we know the women’s code, they were inscribed in the *sātrā*!” said one old man who had lived at the pagoda when he was young. An old woman recalled the “sung poems” (*me sūtr*) which were about women and which forbade them to “vagabond” (*toer leñ*) or to behave “just anyhow” (*phtes phtās*). “The wife must give her husband water when he wakes, she must not step over him,” explained one old man. “These codes order women not to insult their husband and to respect him,” said another. According to a pagoda official, for girls “it’s very constraining (*tjñ nās*)”; if they laugh they lose their virtues, (*khāt lakkh[n]*), if they walk quickly they lose their virtues, if they sit swinging their legs they lose their virtues, if we hear the rustle of their skirt while they’re walking they lose their virtues.”

These behaviour rules addressed to the female sex expressed the Khmer ideal of the “woman bearing virtues” (*srī grap’ lakkh[n]*)¹⁸, a number of educational norms constraining young women oblige them to sit in a respectful fashion (*añguy pat’ joeñ*), not to talk loudly, to hide their teeth with their hands when they laugh, not to let the rustle of their skirts be heard and not to make the floorboards in the house creak when they walk, to adopt retiring, gentle and discrete attitudes (*sam ramy, śnap’ snēm, subhāb rāp sā, dan’ bhlan’, ram dam*), to make few excursions from the family home, in other words not to “vagabond”. They did not have the right to help the monks when they begged by shouting out to those in kitchens and they must stand on the side of the alms given to the monks, to the ancestors and the grandparents. Unlike the boys they did not eat up the “remains of offerings” (*sampak*) which had been given

18. On this well known theme of Cambodian culture see Khing Hoc Dy (1978: 15-43).

to the ancestors and the land guardian spirits. During a funeral procession, they carried with dignity sticks of incense in their hands while the boys in a rude way rushed to grasp the bank notes thrown on the path by the “woman wearing mourning” (*‘nak pāc lāj*),¹⁹ and the sons and nephews of the deceased formed “crossing bridges for the dead” (*sbān chlañ khmoc*) by lying on the ground so that the coffin bearers stepped over them. The ideal of “the woman bearing virtues” obliged young women to show modesty (“pudeur” in French) and restraint in what they say, how they move and where they go. As if their dignity could only result from their consent regarding this oppression.

While their brothers were studying in the monastery the girls were thus growing up by learning the “behaviour codes for women” and the ideal of “the woman bearing virtues”. They learned to show restraint and modesty, to cook and to take care of their younger siblings. Their love life was supervised and their sex life prohibited until their wedding day. The ideal of “the woman bearing virtues” contributed to the evaluation of the “price of [mother’s] milk”, (*thlai dīk ʔoh*) denoting the amount of the matrimonial compensation “demanded” (*paṅgāp*) by the young woman’s parents. During the wedding ceremony four little girls who are related to the bride – dubbed respectively the Misses Ok, Ey, Tey and Tom and qualified as “virgins” (*brahmacārī*) for the occasion – were appointed to “pile up the leaves of virtues” (*puk lakh*).²⁰ They would make a red coloured mixture with a bitter taste that the bride had to chew. By chewing the leaves of “virtues” the young woman “completed her virtues” (*paṃbeñ lakkh[ṇ]*), and by marrying she “bore witness to her debt towards her parents” (*saṅ guṇ*).

III - State schooling

The secular, public, mixed school appeared in Cambodia under the French Protectorate. It was mainly reserved for urban elites and did not really concern the children in rural areas although this is where 80% of the population lived (Ayres, 2000: 25; Chandler, 2011: 149-156; Kiernan, 1998: 14; Prigent, 2016). Following the independence of Cambodia in 1953 schools began to seriously compete with the formal education of the monasteries and they started to welcome the rice farmers’ children. This national-state impulse for schooling was weak regarding high schools but the number of primary schools multiplied

19. Adhémar Leclerc noted the same phenomenon during the cortege of a rich dignitary, the only difference being that the money thrown was not directed at children but at the poor who had come forward to watch (1906: 74).

20. We can hypothesise that there is a play on words here, because there is homophony between *lākh/lākt* “gum-lacquer” and *lakkh(ṇ)* from the Pali *lakkhaṇa* “characteristic; perfection, virtue”, pronounced in each case /lěəʔ/.

between 1950 and 1970 (Khin, 1999). The schoolmasters, who represented the State, the nation and modernity removed the monks' educational monopoly (from the point of view of formal education). At the end of the 1960s "nearly all the Khmers now had access to basic knowledge and the country produced more than a million young people with some education, which was 20 per cent of the population" (Kiernan, 1998: 14). Nevertheless, girls only represented a quarter of the number of pupils at the end of the primary cycle (Smith-Hefner, 1993: 141-142). The context of the Cold War and more specifically of the Vietnam war, linked to Prince Sihanouk's inability to keep the country politically neutral threw Cambodia into a period of war. Five years of civil war between 1970 and 1975 followed by four years of the Khmer Rouge regime led to the destruction of the education system in place (Prigent, 2014). During the 1980s the Soviet-Vietnamese supervision of the country led to a fresh move towards schooling. However, the country was devastated and remained a country at civil war (against the Khmer Rouge factions). Children thus suffered from malnutrition and there were few teachers since many of them had been the object of "Khmer Rouge" ideological hatred so that they had either fled the country, either were dead from exhaustion or either had been murdered. So the move towards schooling in the 1980s stayed slow and progressive, depending on volunteer teachers who were poorly trained. At the beginning of the 1990s, following the collapse of the Soviet bloc, Cambodian peasants still only had very limited experience of state schooling.

It was only after the 1993 elections, under UNO supervisions, and eventually after the 1997 "coup d'État" that Cambodia was restored to true peace. The priority in the 90s had been in favouring the push towards primary education, to make literate the 2/3 of the population who did not know how to read or write and to develop school infrastructures. Then, with the 2000s international development organisations which were closely linked to the international convention of children's rights and to the international challenge of Education for All (EFA), the goal was to improve the quality of education (all the more so since 2015 with Objective 4 of the Sustainable Development Goals). For that, they promoted democratic educational values and the empowerment of children. In fact, these international agenda called into question local pedagogies which made the subordinate and deferential position of the pupils the condition of their good apprenticeship. So, these policies promoted active and "child-centred" teaching and they invited teachers to abandon corporal punishment, to enhance the development of a critical spirit, the individual resolving of problems, cooperation between pupils in class activities, setting up decision making groups and pupil associations. A place should be kept for horizontal socialising and individual initiative during the act of studying. A pedagogical confidence was given to children and the teacher

and the pupil cooperate. In Cambodia this was totally new. These programs also insist strongly on gender equality and call for a decentralised conception of the school system in favour of a stronger implication of communities²¹ in school life. The contemporary school institution in Cambodia, driven by the state and “global-politic” (Abélès, 2012: 177), aims not only at mastery of the Khmer language (and English), mathematics and sciences, but also at producing empowered citizens by the teaching of life skills. A moral economy of education, both liberal and democratic has come up against the problem of the child-vagabond.

1 - Education at the primary school in Krâla

Most children from Cheung Kok go to the primary school at Krâla, less than a kilometer away, just next to the pagoda. Primary school education, which is on a part-time timetable, is rather prized by parents. The four hours of daily classes do not really hinder the family economy especially as part of the season for watching the herds of animals, an activity which takes place during the long school holidays (August – September). The children are too young to be able to earn any money for the family, and they can watch the animals and their younger siblings outside of the half-day school hours²². Moreover, it is better that they study rather than they behave as “vagabonds”. From this point of view, containing the children in an educational institution is desirable for the towns and some schools offer private tuition during the two months’ vacation. The school master (*grū*) pass to the children the values of respect for the age and status hierarchy as well as reading, writing and arithmetic. While it is unlikely that the children will go to secondary school, at least they would acquire those basic skills and would not spend their childhood roaming. Parents are still concerned for their children when the latter enter the first year of primary school.²³ The number of children who “redo” (*dhlāk*) this first year is higher than for other years²⁴ which leads us to suppose that some village children have difficulty bearing this experience of enclosure.

The Krâla primary school is free and the teachers do not offer extra private classes (*pañrīen guor*). Since His Excellency Hang Chuon Naron

21. The use of this UNO term is put into perspective by M.-H. Bacqué and C. Biewener, *L'empowerment, une pratique émancipatrice*, 2013, La Découverte, p. 21-52.

22. The work in the ricefields (ploughing, planting, harvesting) does not really concern them. Exceptionally, when a field has been harvested and transporting the bundles of paddy rice is going to be long and time consuming, the children come out of school for a few days at their parents’ request (Prigent, 2011).

23. Since 2015, more and more primary schools propose a first grade “at infant school” (*sālā mateyy*). Early Childhood Education is today becoming an important issue in international development.

24. Statement based on statistics supplied by the Krâla school for 2013-2014, 2014-2015, 2015-2016.

was appointed at the head of the Ministry of Education in 2013, the salary of primary school teachers has been increased by 150 dollars a month (to reach 250 dollars, progressively, by May 2017). As a counterpart, the teachers must strictly respect the hours of teaching. The issue of gender inequality in terms of access to school education, not in favour of girls, does not concern the primary school. The one in Krâla for example welcome as many girls as boys.²⁵ Moreover, more boys “flee school” (*gec sālā*) and abandon their primary school studies (*jhap’ rīen*). They prefer to go back and watch the animals or go fishing and their parents end up admitting that “they don’t know how to learn” (*rīen at’ ceḥ*), that they are “idle” (*khjil*), that “they have no metaphysical affinity with studying” (*at’ mǎn nissǎy jāmuoy kār rīen sūtr*). The girls have the same access to secondary school and in the Samdech Chuon Nath lower school and high school, they are even more numerous than boys²⁶.

2 - The social life of the classroom

Every morning, in the centre of the playground and before going into class, the pupils get in lines according to which class they are in and up to their sex in order to pay their respects to the national flag which a 6th year pupil raises while his classmates, dressed in school uniform, sing the national anthem. Then the pupils go to wait in line outside their classrooms, once again separated by sex.

When they enter the classroom, the boys and girls mostly sit separately. When the teacher enters all the pupils rise, put their hands together and greet him respectfully. The professor returns the greeting by saying a polite “yes” then tells them to sit down. The pupils, in turn, thank him with one voice, then they sit down at their desks. The organisation of this exchange express all the hierarchical superiority of the “master” (*grū*). The pupils have four manuals in the Khmer language, mathematics, social studies and sciences. Actually, the Khmer language and mathematics take up most of the teaching time. Sciences are infrequently studied and social studies mainly consist in continuing learning to read and write. From a pedagogical point of view the pupils learn to read and write by heart, through repetitive work and detailed recopying. The usual exercises consist in reading out loud, individually or collectively, and copying out pages of the manuals. This type of pedagogy, consisting of

25. According to statistical documents drawn up by the head of the school girls represented 50,2% of enrolled pupils in 2001, 51,3% in 2002, 51,5% in 2003, 51% in 2004, 48% in 2005, 51,7% in 2006.

26. 52,3% in 2014-2015, 53,9% in 2015-2016, 55,7% in 2016-2017. No significant differences between the 8th, 10th and 12th years. Of the pupils who abandoned their studies during the school year 2016-2017 (including all six years together) boys represented 58%.

“repetition – memorisation” (*dandēñ*) is also found in the religious teaching dispensed down the centuries in the pagodas (Forest, 2008: 119).

The “child-centred” teaching promoted under the influence of world education governance is interpreted by the Krâla primary school teachers as getting the children to work in groups. Such a pedagogical approach does not convince them; it places them on the edge of the act of studying, places too much trust in the children and becomes an unequal approach because weaker children remain in ignorance (they do “nothing” during group activities) (Prigent, 2014; Song, 2015). And by forbidding corporal punishment, the international convention on children’s rights weakens their authority. In their opinion, the children fear them less now than before and even more since parents are much less on the teachers’ side. While they were more welcoming to educational policies regarding hygiene and health the schoolmasters are resisting the international promotion of democratic educational values and the empowerment of children. This rather conservative attitude is probably the result of a misunderstanding, a communication problem between international education institutions and the local level education functionaries (Prigent, 2014).

3 - Playground games

Up until 2013, children spent nearly a third of their school time playing in the playground. During this leisure time, the boys tend to prefer games using counters, such as “tap the sandal” (*jhūs*), “tap the marbles” (*pāñ’ ghīl*) or “tap the figurines” (*leñ rūp*). In these games they endeavour to win a stake that has been built up collectively and are playing games which adults qualify negatively as “money games” (*lpaen sī sañ*), typical of “vagabonding” activities. As for the girls, they prefer games like hopscotch (*mīk*), elastic skipping ropes (*leñ lot*) or hand-clapping singing games. In hopscotch they must face ever more difficult constraints in jumping. As the game goes on each one wins a square (marked on the ground) and these become “houses”. The elastic skipping games also oblige the players to make more and more complicated jumps. In hand-clapping singing games, the verbal texts tend to relate stories of “failures” mainly associated with female characters.²⁷ Boys and girls mix more easily in chasing games (*leñ cāp*), which in “the fullness of age” provide good occasions for dalliance (see below).²⁸

27. For an interpretation of the gendered dimension of these children’s games, see Steven Prigent (2013).

28. For more information on children’s games, see the works of William Corsaro (1985), Julie Delalande (2010), Olivier Morin (2010), Iona and Peter Opie (1969), H.B Schwartzman (1976) and Brian Sutton-Smith (1971). On the gendered dimensions of children’s games, see in particular the work of Barrie Thorne (1993) and Marjorie Goodwin (2001).

**Photos 5 et 6 - Classroom entry ritual and classroom
(clichés Steven Prigent)**

IV - Older brothers and sisters – models of emancipation?

This fourth part aims to highlight the new behaviours of young singleton in the village today. These older brothers and sisters have for the most part stopped their studies to go and work as unskilled workers, they use Facebook and You Tube applications on their smartphones, are extremely interested in Cambodian, South Korean and Thai stars of song and cinema, and try to break free from parental authority as far as their pre-marriage love life is concerned. While the young women try to escape the ideal of the woman “bearing virtues”, young men prefer the companionship of parties and the consumption of alcohol to filial debt. The parents of the village agree in saying that the children of today respect their parents less than in the past, thereby underlining a risk of “vagabondage” which is more worrying than usual.

Compared with previous generations, the young single people of Cheung Kok are connected to more extended social networks. Already, their studies at Samdech Chuon Nath college, which covers a large part of the district, meaning that on a daily basis they can frequent people from other villages as well as from the “semi-urban” towns situated along the national road. They travel about on motor bikes and often go out along the banks of the Mekong river in the provincial capital, Kompong Cham, about eight kilometres away. Apart from this sociological mixing, the distance to the school and the greater independence regarding transport, the recent usage of mobile phones offers a new margin for manoeuvre to the young as far as their strategies for organising their love lives is concerned. They communicate a lot by phone and so can send messages very discreetly. Finally, this “computer-generation” (*samay kum̃būdār*) has been able to acquire a smartphone and use apps like Facebook and You Tube which connect them to a certain globalised world while at the same time allowing them to use love life strategies that are beyond parental control.

In the current context of pressure on the land (Pillot, 2008: 497) which means that the village children will only ever inherit a small acreage of rice fields, most young single people drop out of school before the end of secondary school, in order to earn wages as unskilled labour, mainly in the industrial sector. The women work in textiles and the men on building sites. While part of their wages goes to their parents (particularly for the women, who are considered as being more faithful regarding the debt towards the parents) the remaining money allows them some financial autonomy to participate in consumer society. At Cheung Kok, girls aged between 10 and 15 identify strongly with their “sisters” who, when they return to the village for a wedding or the Day of the Dead or the New Year, display their wealth and their

elegance. Lack of exposure to the sun, which is a consequence of their jobs, means that their skin stays pale and this is an aesthetic criterion particularly valued during singlehood. They dress “short and tight”, they “show their flesh”, they are more “modern” (*damnoep*). While parents may encourage their daughters to go and work in the factories, many of them are willing to go especially as they know they will meet up with their cousins or young aunts.²⁹ Young women’s recent access to urban wage-earning allows them to enter consumer society and this leads to them liberating themselves from the norms of modesty (“pudeur”) which for so long characterised the female sex (the ideal of the woman ‘bearing virtues’). Today they even dare to sit cross-legged (*aṅguy baen bhnaen*), a body posture traditionally reserved to men.

Pop music stars, always accompanied by videos, emphasise the theme of love and its fragility. Unlike the pre-war songs, contemporary songs do not feature the parents as much as the love rival. In fact, these stories always deploy three protagonists: a man and two women, or a woman and two men, always with the idea that one of the three is redundant. This love triangle theme is widely used in Thai and South Korean television series, which are very popular in Cheung Kok. The My-TV channel, set up in 2010, is particularly aimed at young people. The programmes broadcast many Cambodian, Thai and South Korean clips and, more rarely, American ones. They prompt viewers to vote for their favourite singers or groups using their mobile phones and these pop stars adopt bodily poses, hairstyles and clothes which are totally new and this is not without the disapproval of older generations. The South Korean clips show group dances which are rhythmic, rapid and saucy – showing a group of attractive single people and this is the social expression of strong horizontality.

During the dances held for the New Year, which might easily be considered as occasions for romance for young singletons, dressed in their finest clothes, they adopt the “wiggly and agitated” (*rām nāk*) dance moves. These contrast starkly with the more traditional styles where the dancers, smiling fixedly, move in a circle (*rām van*) or face to face (*rām sārāvān*) according to steps and hand movements which are strictly coded, evoking the movements of classic Khmer dance. “They dance in an agitated manner, like that, without having learnt anything, it doesn’t worry them [...] It’s not nice to watch [...] you must dance according to the rules, like for the *kpāc*³⁰ dance” said one old lady. Under the influence of pop stars, young people today dye their hair and style it like “hooligans” (*sdāv*), like “wild / full of desire children” (*kmeñ damnoeñ*). The pop stars, who are consumer products strongly influenced

29. My fieldwork contradicts the geographer Gabriel Fauveaud, when he states that these young women have very little say in the decision-making process around their migration (Fauveaud, 2012: 9).

30. A dance in the round where men and women advance by bending the knees.

by Thailand and South Korea and relayed by the Cambodian media, target young people who, being directly concerned, find themselves with ideas of emancipation which they then redistribute on a local scale. This is so strong that today parents are beginning to imitate the young on the dance floor. Moreover, if the “popular games” (*lpaen prajāpriy*) played during the Khmer New Year festivals have always been good occasions for courtship, newer games are a chance to show less shyness when it comes to expressing feelings of love. In the games “Three minus one” (probably an allusion to the love triangle popular in pop songs) “Seek the mother in law” or “Carry off the girlfriend” (this last game being a substitute for the preceding game, somewhat ousting the mother in law), young singletons flirt in the moonlight, on the village paths, a little way away from their parents (Prigent, 2012).

So, according to parents, young people today are adopting courtship behaviour which is more difficult to control. This alarmist tone is also heard on the topic of young people’s recent access to wage earning: their solvency would make them both more autonomous and more irresponsible. Under the influence of huge advertising campaigns claiming the manly and friendly merits of beer drinking, the young men who leave their home to work on building sites would now more often indulge in drunkenness, vagabondage and violence (among themselves). Some of them also take methamphetamine (*mā; dīk kak*). According to some people, up until the end of the 1990s young people did not fight so much and did not drink so much. Only married people really drank in the 1990s, consuming rice alcohol or palm wine (but not beer). During a Thai travelling fair (*tāmñ bibār(ñ) thai*) held in Kompong Cham in August 2016, a second-rate star, who came on before the singer Kaeow Visna made a surprising announcement. After having sung three songs, she told a story promoting the interests of the fair’s sponsor, the beer producer X. In this story, a young man asked for the hand of a young women but the negotiations were difficult; the young man, heartbroken, bought half a crate of X beer in order to take his mind off things and to get drunk with his friends. By luck he won a big prize and acquired a motor bike (in Cambodia, beer producers have integrated a kind of lottery since each can bears a potential winning number). His financial situation improved and he managed to marry her. Then, as a conclusion, in case the message had not been clear enough: “you, young people, you know that love can hurt, but when you hurt, drink X beer and things will be better”.³¹ Male alcoholism in fact is very likely to become a public health problem in the countryside, if not already. Generally speaking, young men today are altogether much “worse” (*khuc*) than before.

31. Transcription transcribed from memory as I had not recorded it.

More widely, and still according to the parents, young people now dare contradict their elders much more than before. According to Mr Seak, the deputy head of the village and linked to the Cambodian People's Party which has been in power for thirty years, children help their parents much less than previously. After having carried two or three bales of paddy they have had enough and they leave. Their parents say, "huh, under Pol Pot, we did that for 10 hours a day!" Then he adds, "Hun Sen freed us from Pol Pot, but young people today, they say that Hun Sen liberated their mother, he didn't liberate them [...]. Sam Rainsy and Kem Sokha [the leaders of the main opposition party] are acting so that young people forget [their history] (*pambhlec*) and they don't believe the Cambodian People's Party; they say that Tuol Sleng Prison is just a 'fake stories'". This weakening of the filial and hierarchical relationship is part of a reversal of a rule of politeness which is widespread in Cambodia which requires that when one person meets another that he inquire where he is going or where he has come from. Mr Seak explained to me that a young person must always be the one who begins this greeting when his path crosses that of someone older. However, according to him, this rule is no longer respected by the young generation today. In order to avoid breaking this relation of courtesy between the ages, older people are now resigned to making the greeting first.

When a young woman turns down a marriage proposal that her parents have approved, they will say to her "the cake is not bigger than the cake-tin", a metaphorical way of reminding her that she should not hope to have this superior hold over them for very long. In other words, she may refuse this time but should make more effort the next time. Children are also told "it is not wise for eggs to collide with a stone" a way of signifying that they are taking a risk (*ban mǎn' kum jal' nɛn thma*), by provoking their parents. Today, these sayings are losing their impact. This study, which has shown the relative weakening of the rule of deference between the generations (under the influence of consumer society, the young singletons wage earning and to a lesser extent, the democratic educational values and those of empowerment promoted by the "global-politic"), leads to question the future of "vagabondage" and family solidarity in contemporary Cambodian rural society, in a differentiated way according to gender.

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