



THE KHMER MENTALITY

(Based on a 1997 translation of the original Khmer text, "Proloeng Khmer," published in 1973)

Author: Professor Sar Sarun (deceased)

Faculty of Arts and Human Sciences

University of Phnom Penh

Editing author: Khmer Aphiwath Group

Publisher: Khmer Aphiwath Group, Melbourne, Australia

Translator: Kua Cham

Further Edited 2003 for the Khmer Institute by Vannareth Lamm and William Snyder

The First Root: MATRIARCHY

A principal component of the Khmer mentality is matriarchy. At all levels of organization within Khmer society, ranging from family life to national government, the accepted leader or decision-maker is a woman.

This pattern dates back to the beginnings of our recorded history. During the Funan Period we had as our monarch a queen known variously as "Soma," "Liev Yi," or "Neang Neak." An Indian prince known as "Kaodinhya" (Indian name), "Hun Tien" (Chinese name), or "Preah Thong" (traditional Khmer name) conquered the nation of Funan and eventually married the Khmer queen. During the wedding the prince followed the queen, and held on to the edge of her scarf so as not to be distracted by his surroundings.

Our Khmer ancestors carved this story into the walls of Angkor to remind us of the ancient origins of our matriarchy. At present-day royal weddings, custom still requires the groom to hold the edge of the bride's scarf. For ordinary people as well, matriarchy is a basic principle of social organization. This can be seen in the titles of important positions, in educational maxims, and in common social beliefs.

A) Within the family, female titles normally precede male ones:

- "mother and father"
- "grandmother and grandfather"
- "aunt and uncle"

B) In the armed forces, important titles include:

- "mother of the army" (army chief)
- "mother of the command" (commander)
- "deputy mother of the command" (deputy commander)

C) Government titles include:

- "mother of the commune" (commune leader)
- "mother of the town" (mayor)

- "mother of the district" (district councilor)
- "mother of the block" (block representative for a group of ten households)

D) An educational maxim:

- "It is better to face a shipwreck than to have the house burn down." (meaning: it is better to lose the father than the mother, because the father is less important.)

E) Some common social beliefs can be expressed as follows:

- Clean husband + Corrupt wife = Corrupt
- Bribe-free husband + Bribed wife = Bribed
- Husband's disapproval + Wife's approval = Approval

The wife is the chief of the family, while the husband seeks work outside the home in order to bring money back to her. If the sum is less than expected, his wife may chastise him. Khmer wives have the personality of "master-wife." In contrast, in Chinese society the husband controls the family's finances, and Chinese wives have the personality of "slave-wife."

The Second Root: HIDDEN STRENGTH

According to current research into our national history, a second element of the Khmer mentality is a "hidden strength," which has kept the nation from perishing despite repeated attacks from the outside world. We are now asking ourselves, "What is this hidden strength?"

Many academics, as well as other citizens who are concerned with the nation's future integrity, are now searching for the source of this defensive power. Historical research tells us that the Khmer nation has repeatedly been invaded. In some of these periods the Khmer were enslaved by the Thai. The successive Khmer capitals of Angkor and Longvek were subjected to terrible devastation. The great sages and scholars were taken prisoner and sent to serve in the invaders' country. How have the Khmer land and the Khmer people survived to the present day?

These case studies show that the Khmer have a hidden quality of persistence, which gives them defensive strength and keeps the Khmer nation from falling. For this reason our ancestors created the popular proverb, "The Khmer territories will never perish." The very fact that they had the confidence to say this clearly indicates the strength contained in the Khmer mentality. Yet, we no longer know the exact nature of this essential, hidden strength, nor exactly where it resides in the Khmer identity.

Only when we find this hidden part of the Khmer spirit can we continue to protect our land and our nation from danger. Until then, we will have no reason to believe the optimistic proverb mentioned above. The Khmer spirit and identity are tightly intertwined with our culture and civilization.

The Third Root: SELF-PRAISE

The third element of the Khmer mentality, based ultimately on considerations of geography, lies in the fact that the Khmer have considerable pride, and have a strong inclination to praise themselves. This is because the Khmer people originally belonged to an ethnic family known as the Mon-Khmer, which inhabited the entire peninsula of Indochina. At that time the region was called *Sovanna Phum* ('Golden Country'), and shared a border with China.

The name comes from the Pali words *sovann*, meaning 'gold', and *phum*, meaning 'land' or 'country'. People living in the Golden Country of *Sovanna Phum* led joyful lives, blessed with natural riches, and in their unconscious mind there slowly developed a high level of pride, as well as a tendency to boast. The inhabitants of *Sovanna Phum* belonged to three different ethnic groups: the Mon, the Cham, and the Khmer. They lived in tribal communities, without clear land boundaries, and mainly traded gold with the Portuguese, who traveled by sail in the China Sea.

The people of the Golden Country had no concerns other than the gold trade. This is what gave rise to their boastful attitude, and to the development of a high level of pride. In this respect the Mon ranked first, followed by the Cham and then the Khmer, who were the humblest of the three. Nonetheless, the Khmer were firmly trapped in the same up-bringing, and our Khmer ancestors made this explicit in the following parable:

- The Mon take the heavens for their seat.
- The Cham raise a single palm to the sky.
- The Khmer ascend to the clouds, but then pass through the earthworm's shit.

According to this saying, the self-praise of the Khmer went as high as the clouds, but not so high as the sky or the heavens. Moreover, the Khmer usually came back down to earth quickly: They boasted, but then returned to reality. When the Khmer spoke among themselves, they did not realize that they were boasting, because they shared a common level of pride. But when they spoke with the Cham, who were even prouder, they could see that the Cham liked to boast. Likewise, the Cham did not see themselves as a boastful people, but when they spoke with the Mon, they did notice that the Mon were remarkably fond of boasting.

- The Mon boasted more than anyone else, until they lost all their land.
- The Cham, second only to the Mon in boasting, lost their land, too.
- The Khmer boasted only moderately, and thus retained some of their land.

Yet, by no means should we expect the Khmer to retain their remaining land forever. At present the Khmer nation is headed for catastrophe.

How did boasting cause these three ethnic groups to lose so much of their land? The answer goes something like this. As they continued boasting and enjoying their natural resources, they forgot that the surrounding ethnic groups coveted their land. The Thai, who originated in China's southern province of Yunnan, became known in the Eighth Century when they started to migrate southward. When the Mongolians invaded China in the Thirteenth Century, the Thai took advantage of the resulting chaos and attacked the city of Sukhotey. They took over all the Mon areas, and also conquered a number of northern Khmer provinces beyond the Danrek Mountains, along the Semourn River. These included Nokoreach, Surin, Sangkeas, Kouk-khan, Sisaket, and Burirum. Moreover, they extended their control into southwestern areas, as far as Malaysia. All of this territory had belonged to the Sovanna Phum Peninsula.

Later, in 1794 and 1795, three Khmer aristocrats were competing for state power. Each considered himself superior to the others, because all three belonged to an unconditionally proud people. One of the aristocrats, Ben, tricked another, Sous, into assassinating the third, Mou. Afterwards Ben tried to kill Sous, but failed, because the latter had strong allies. Ben then requested the help of the Thai army, whom he allowed to enter Cambodia. In exchange for their help, Ben let Thailand annex several Khmer provinces, including Battambang, Mongkolburi, and Serisophon.

What led these Khmer aristocrats to fight one another for power? In that day there was an active race for power based on self-proclaimed superiority, with assistance from foreign armies. The aristocrats had placed on the throne a six-year-old prince named Ang Eng, the son of Prince Otey II, who was too young to rule. Their goal was to seize power for themselves.

Thus, we can see from history that foreign invasions of the Khmer territory were possible only because Khmer leaders were stubbornly convinced of their own superiority, and failed to realize that the country was headed for disaster.

The Khmer fondness for boasting is also well-documented, for instance, in such ethical poems as "Father's Testament," "Rules for Children and Grandchildren," "Fable for Children and Grandchildren," and "Conduct Rules for Men." All these writings seek to awaken the Khmer people from their dreams of self-praise and irrational pride.

The following are some examples.

"Father's Testament":
DO NOT BOAST ABOUT YOUR STRENGTH...

"Fable for Children and Grandchildren":
A FROG BOASTS THAT IT CAN FIGHT WITH THE ELEPHANT...
A TOAD BOASTS THAT IT IS AS BEAUTIFUL AS GOLD...

© 2003 The Khmer Institute. A Web-Based Organization. All rights Reserved.

"Rules for Children and Grandchildren":
DO NOT BOAST ABOUT YOUR RANK...

Another example comes from an academic conference held at Chakdhumuk Hall on 9 November 1970, where a Buddhist monk argued that the Khmer language "has excellent linguistic rules that are superior to those of any human language in the world [sic]."

Further discussion of our people's taste for boasting can be found in a recently published book by Mr. Bun Chan Mol, *The Character of the Khmer*.

The Fourth Root: **AGRICULTURE**

The fourth element of the Khmer mentality is a link to agriculture. From the beginning, Khmer society relied almost exclusively on agriculture, and eventually it took agriculture as an important source of cultural identity. All aspects of Khmer education have their "roots" in agriculture, because the Khmer have a strong tendency to use agricultural metaphors in explanations.

A) In the family domain:

- "WHEN YOU FARM, LOOK AT THE GRASS."
(meaning, when you marry off your children, look at their partners' roots.)
- "START FARMING NOW, WHILE THE SOIL IS STILL WARM."
(meaning, start courting the girl now, while your heart is still aflame.)
- "TRANSPLANTED RICE-PLANTS BRING ALONG THEIR ORIGINAL SOIL."
(meaning, a wife can elevate her husband.)

B) In the military domain:

- "YOU FARM A FIELD WITH WATER."
(meaning, you fight a war with food.)

C) In the domain of national development:

- "AGRICULTURE IS THE BREATH OF THE COUNTRY."

D) In education, more generally:

- "DROP BY DROP, THE PALM TREE FILLS THE TUBE."
- "VERTICAL RICE PLANTS BEAR NOTHING, LEANING ONES BEAR GRAIN."
- "HAPPY FARMING AND PLANTING WILL BRING
TRADE, RESPECT, AND A GOOD MEAL.
REAL WEALTH ISN'T HARD TO GET.
THE JOY IS TRUE, BECAUSE IT LASTS."

(from "Father's Testament"; original verse in crow's-walk rhyme)

- "THINK ABOUT, AND WORK ON, GROWING RICE
DURING ALL THE SEASONS.
A RICE FIELD SHOULD HAVE A SIGN,
WHILE A FRUIT FARM SHOULD HAVE A FENCE."

(from "Inherited Conduct Rules"; original verse in Bhrmngit rhyme)

The Fifth Root: **INDIFFERENCE TO RULES**

The fifth element of the Khmer mentality, due once again to considerations of geography, is a relative indifference to laws and regulations. Why should this be so? The Khmer region is seldom threatened by

the natural disasters found in Japan and Europe:

- Freezing winters
- Earthquakes
- Volcanic eruptions
- Savage storms
- Typhoons
- Large-scale floods

The Khmer territory seldom faces such disasters. Indeed, natural disasters are almost unheard of, aside from minor floods that occur every few decades, and even they are not especially brutal.

The climate is so warm that Khmer people can survive without clothing. The only significant "earthquakes" are caused by bombs dropped by B-52's, which come day and night, destroying both the farmland and the occupants of many villages.

Because the Khmer countryside is rarely subjected to natural catastrophes, the Khmer people are less aware of nature, and have little need to adjust themselves to natural constraints. This exemption from constraints has shaped the Khmer mentality, making it insensitive to social and legal rules except where there is coercion. This stands in contrast to countries in colder regions, where people cannot even survive without appropriate clothing.

Yet, people from those regions who migrate to the Khmer territory eventually adopt a mindset similar to the Khmer people's. Likewise, Khmer people who go to live in colder regions eventually adopt the mindset of the people there. Thus, the fifth element of the Khmer soul is explained by geographical conditions.

The Sixth Root: BEING INACTIVE

The sixth element of the Khmer mentality is inactivity. Because the Khmer people live in the tropics, they tend to avoid physical exertion. The Khmer artistic spirit dwells in a soft, fanciful, and romantic state, one that is low in energy. Khmer music tends to be sentimental, and to make people sleepy.

Khmer people move slowly. They set off for the workplace at a relaxed pace, as if they were on vacation. These factors have shaped the Khmer mentality to prefer people who are inactive rather than active, conservative rather than progressive.

Examples:

The Khmer admire people who work less and earn more, rather than people who work hard and earn little. Likewise, the Khmer admire a government official who simply signs a document and earns millions of riels, rather than one who works from morning till evening and hardly earns enough to survive. In fact they should appreciate the latter, who makes a personal sacrifice and saves money for the national budget. Yet, if an educator and a customs official simultaneously ask to marry a family's daughter, the former will end in despair. Where does this come from?

Indeed, this is the unfairness of society in a tropical country.

Shall we continue with this lifestyle, spoiled by nature? Or shall we try to win out over nature? Shall we destroy this root of the Khmer mentality, or leave it undisturbed? The solution lies mainly in the awareness of Khmer youngsters, but the right awareness will be possible only after education – that is, after enlightenment. If we lack enlightenment, our minds may unconsciously drift in the wrong direction. Being blind or ignorant is a great evil, and allows other people to manipulate us easily.

The authors of Khmer folktales exhibit this aspect of the Khmer mentality in the following ways:

- An ignorant man finds two jars of gold hidden in the ground;
- A senseless man usually has a wife of excellent quality;
- A stupid man is the one likeliest to get sacred powers;
- An uneducated man gets promoted to the rank of lord;

- Kong Hean is made a Khmer hero by his own shit.

Another example is an old Khmer saying that tells us, "A sage falls into a hole, while a fool rises up to paradise." Shall we retain this root of the Khmer mentality, or cut it off?

The Seventh Root: FUZZINESS ON COMMITMENT

The seventh root of the Khmer mentality is a tendency to be confused about commitments.

This is because the Khmer people live in a country in which the various seasons are not clear-cut: the rainy season and the dry season, as well as the cold season, start and end at fuzzy dates, known to no one. In contrast, countries in colder regions have clear-cut seasons. For example, on the European continent:

- Spring is from 21st March to 21st June;
- Summer is from 21st June to 22nd September;
- Autumn is from 22nd September to 21st December;
- Winter is from 21st December to 21st March.

Clear-cut seasons have trained the people of that region to have clear plans:

- When they work, they concentrate on working;
- When they play, they concentrate on playing;
- When they study, they concentrate on studying;
- When they eat, they concentrate on eating;
- When they rest, they stop all work.

In France it is almost impossible to find a restaurant that serves anything more than drinks before 9AM, or after 10PM. The Khmer region's fuzzy seasons have spoiled the minds of the people living there, with fuzziness in all aspects of commitment:

- Work and play are mixed together;
- Conflict at work is similar to conflict at home;
- Study time and break time are intermingled;
- Eating time lasts from morning through the middle of the night, until the sun rises again;
- Office tasks and home tasks are mixed together;
- A government-owned car is also taken as a personally-owned car, and used to carry the wife, transport the children to school, and even carry the mistress;
- Experts at organizing theatrical plays, or at teaching in school, assume ministerial positions in the government (although different people have talents in different areas).

In order to correct this root of the Khmer mentality, it is necessary to impose truly strict laws, and also to have good examples from the top down.

The Eighth Root: EXTREMISM

The eighth element of the Khmer mentality is an ambivalent extremism. Khmer extremist thinking is not always oriented in one particular direction. When we come to like something, we go out of our way to stick to it. But when we start to dislike it, we go far in the opposite direction.

This is reflected in the following popular expressions:

- The more loving, the more hating. For example, in the story of "Tum and Teav," Teav's mother initially loved Tum so much that she asked him to become her adopted son. But when she started to dislike him, she sought to have him killed in an extremely violent way.
- Teav's mother: "OR-CHOUN, YOU HAVE POWER. WHY NOT USE IT RIGHT NOW? ARREST THAT STUBBORN SHIT TUM. HAVE NO MERCY. ORDER YOUR MEN TO BEAT HIM, STAB HIM, KILL HIM. HIS GUILT IS TOO HEAVY TO BE PARDONED ON EARTH" (original verse in seven-word rhyme)
- When we believe people, we believe them a hundred and twenty percent. But if we stop believing, we stop forever.
- If you drink, then drink so much that others have to carry you. If you can still walk by yourself, then what was the point in drinking?
- If you kill someone, go ahead and taste the flesh.
- If you put your hand into the fish paste, go ahead and stick your whole arm in.
- If you want to cut someone, go ahead – don't just pretend!

The Ninth Root: HONORING OATHS

The ninth element of the Khmer mentality is the sanctity of one's "truth-word," or oath. Faithfulness to one's word is among the principal Khmer virtues. Examination of Khmer literature indicates that this has been true for a very long time. Some believe that it resulted from contact with Hinduism, for Hindu Brahmans were considered the agents of God, with a mission to spread their religion, and were said to honor their word strictly. Truth to one's word was seen as a major virtue of Hinduism, and indeed as the essence of its theology.

- The essence of the body is chastity.
- The essence of speaking is one's oath.
- The essence of the mind is courage.

We can see this philosophy in the Khmer version of an Indian legend called "Ramayana," where a king named Preah Bat Tusarath does not dare violate his oath. The King has promised a woman named Neang Kaikesi that he will leave his throne to a particular prince, Preah Phirut, if he wins a war with the Sun. In Part One of "Ramayana," the city of Aiyutya is at the center of a conflict over the throne, and the solution is for the King's oath to take priority over tradition. As a consequence, Preah Ream, Preah Laksma, and Neang Sita have to leave the kingdom and live in the forest.

In the story of "A Young Weaver of Palm-leaf Baskets," a personal oath is once again taken as a binding contract. The weaver is stuck at the top of a palm tree, and promises to become a slave to anyone who will save him from falling to his death. A person passing by, riding on an elephant, takes him at his word and initiates a rescue, without asking for any real guarantee of the promise. The elephant rider himself becomes trapped with the weaver. The two make the same promise to four bald men, who again come to their rescue without requiring any real guarantee, because they take the two men's promise as an oath.

In two other folk tales, "A Man and a Tiger" and "A Man and a Crocodile," the main character promises a wild animal that he will come back and be eaten, as soon as he has written his will. In each story, the man keeps his word. Likewise, in "Golden Arrow," a king states that he will kill anyone who interferes with his war plan. When he discovers that his own consort, the Queen, has made this mistake, he bitterly forces himself to keep his word, and executes her with the golden arrow.

To capture the sanctity of one's oath, the Khmer people have formulated the following proverb:

- "ONE'S WORD IS AS PRECIOUS TO A HUMAN BEING AS IVORY IS PRECIOUS TO AN ELEPHANT."

Yet, the sanctity of one's personal oath decreased somewhat after an event known as "the lord's tea-spilling," which first occurred around 1845 under an occupying Vietnamese general, Troeung Minh Yang. One night the general ordered his troops to behead four or five Khmer citizens, in response to an order from the Vietnamese emperor, Ming Mang. The victims' heads were then used to support the boiler for his tea.

This practice, which continued up until the French entered our country, shook the Khmers' spirit to its very core. In response, the Khmer people began to consider "tricky" approaches to problem-solving, as indicated in the following saying:

- "CONSIDER THE CURVED ROAD; AVOID THE STRAIGHT PATH."

Yet, the value placed on one's oath persists to this day, and has been inherited in something close to its original form by people in rural and mountainous areas, whose strict adherence to their personal word resembles the practice of an ascetic monk. In mountainous regions, people teach their children that a person who fails to honor an oath cannot live on the mountain.

The Tenth Root: CHASTITY AND PURITY

The tenth element of the Khmer mentality is to place a high value on chastity and purity. Indeed, the Khmer essence is a devotion to chastity, especially in women. Khmer women work incredibly hard to preserve their chastity, including, of course, their physical purity, or virginity. Correspondingly, Khmer men are inclined to accept as "queen" of their heart only a woman of fairly complete chastity, for which bodily purity is a necessary condition.

When a single woman loses her purity, she generally believes that her body has no more worth, having lost its essence. Her life becomes meaningless, and she sometime tries to end it through suicide. This stands in stark contrast to European women, who generally accept the loss of bodily purity as a natural event in their life, and who are more inclined to value the reality of their heart, which they consider the essence of their life.

Khmer people place greater value on the quality of the body, than on the quality of the heart. There are those who believe that this emphasis on bodily essence has its roots in Brahmanism, for the Brahman likewise values bodily essence as a principal quality of Brahmanhood. Yet, we believe that such a transfer of values is possible only when the recipient was, at some level, already thinking along similar lines.

The existence of this value in the Khmer mentality is noted in many works of Khmer literature:

- In the story of "Ramayana," when Preah Ream takes refuge in a forest, his wife Neang Sita accompanies him.
- In the story of "Preah Vesantar," when Preah Vesantar is exiled to a forest, his wife Neang Metri goes with him.

Some people think that these stories are influenced by Indian thought. Yet, acceptance by one country of another country's influence, whether in beliefs, customs, religion, or ideology, is possible only when the influence is compatible with the accepting country's pre-existing ideas. Hence, we conclude that Khmer women's devotion to chastity existed even before the Indian influence, which simply added new momentum to our own way of thinking, and led to a greater fondness for stories that praise this value.

For example:

- In the story of "Tum and Teav," which is a purely Khmer love story, we see the Khmer woman's devotion to chastity clearly in the deeds of Neang Teav. When she learns that her lover Tum has been executed with a knife, she follows him by cutting her own throat with a knife.
- In the story of "Sophat," Neang Manyan believes that Sophat has drowned, and follows her sweetheart by drowning herself in a river.

Now, what evidence do we have that this characteristic is invariably present? One piece of evidence comes from the present-day rotation of Khmer soldiers through different locations, which is required by different missions of the armed forces. As the husbands respond to various dangers, the wives follow them and devote themselves to providing support. Despite the challenges to family finances, and the difficulty of constantly changing their habits and lifestyle, Khmer women take this devotion as their highest priority, and thereby preserve their chastity.

**"Knowing others is Intelligent;
Knowing yourself is true wisdom.
Mastering others is power;
Mastering yourself is true strength."**
