

BARRIERS AND BRIDGES TO THE GOSPEL IN THE KHMER WORLDVIEW

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I. Spiritual Strongholds

The existing religious belief system is a syncretism of spiritism, animism, Hinduism, and Buddhism. These deeply engrained beliefs blind people from the truth. In addition, there are forces that keep them in the darkness. For instance, the prevalent rituals (burning incense, offering food, etc.) to appease spirits tap into the fear of being harmed by them via curses, illnesses, and other misfortune. Many fear evil spirits and wear charms, use fetishes, or participate in rituals for spiritual protection. On the other hand, the common practice of worshiping ancestral spirits is the culturally acceptable way to show love, honor, and loyalty to one's family. They believe that forsaking these practices would lead to punishment by the ancestral spirits. Fear of not appeasing the spirit world is a barrier but can also serve as a bridge in that Khmer are keenly aware of the spiritual realm. The truth of Christ's power and authority above all spirits would certainly be good news to those who want to be free of fear. The belief in reincarnation and *karma* is deeply embedded in the Khmer worldview. Most follow merit-making rituals because they desire good fortune in the present life and especially want to secure a better lot in the next life. This reflects the belief in karma, "*Do good and will get good. Do bad and will get bad.*" Most do not strive for Nirvana because they realize that this is rather difficult to achieve. The Khmer proverb, "*Make a boatload of merit, but if one sin comes in, then all is lost,*" shows an awareness that even one slight sin can nullify a lifetime effort of doing good deeds for merit. The belief in reincarnation and karma and the practice of making merit taps into basic human desires. At its best, it offers a so-called "hope" for good things in the future but lacks any assurance. At its worst, it drives others to be greedy and selfish. These dynamics are seen in the rich and the poor. The rich make merit in order to secure good fortune for their future, but the poor are perceived as ones who did not make sufficient merit or committed grave sins in their past life. Their present state of poverty is the karma/consequence of something they did or failed to do in their past life. The irony is that they are unable to make the merits needed to improve their lot for the next life because of their present state of poverty. This leads to a sense of hopelessness and a fatalistic attitude. They do not see any way out to improve their lot because they are caught in this catch-22 cycle, and they resign themselves to the belief that they must have done something terribly bad in their past life to deserve what they face now. However, this hopelessness is actually where a bridge can be made. An emphasis on the dignity and value of each person in God's eyes would appeal to the poor who are looked down upon in society. Another emphasis on the truth that *all men are destined to one life and to die only once* would counter the lies that they are a condemned people resigned to such a fate because of a previous life. For the rich who are unfulfilled with their fortune or insecure about their next life, the truth about "one life, one death" may bring about conviction and draw them to the assurance of salvation in Christ alone.

In some areas there are practices of animism such as the worship of created things rather than the Creator God. Proclamation of a Creator God is very difficult for some to comprehend. The Khmer translation of the statement, "God created man" sounds foolish to them because in their mind only people can 'create' (*bonk kaudt*) another person. The absence of a Creator God in their worldview thus makes it hard for them to grasp the identity of the Lord God.

II. Cultural Values

A. Loyalty to Heritage and Traditions

Khmer non-believers perceive Khmer Christians as those who deny/ betray the Khmer culture. Because the Khmer believers no longer participate in ancestral worship particularly on significant

holidays such as Khmer New Year and *Pjeum Bon*, they are thought of as ungrateful and disobedient. A break away from these traditions is offensive and embarrassing for the family of a believer. A Christian Khmer is accused of hating his/her parents because he/she does not comply with the duty of caring for the ancestral spirits and thus means that they will not fulfill the duty of taking care of his/her parents' spirits after they have died. This non-compliance is shameful to the family reputation. It implies that their parents do not know how to raise their child properly, and that the child denies his/her Cambodian heritage. The social pressure of one's family losing face this way often deters many from receiving Jesus.

When counseling pre-believers who seem near to committing to Christ, it's best to tell them upfront that they will face persecution rather than saying that all their problems will be solved and that the Christian life is only joy and peace. They will be disillusioned later on if they are misled to believe that the Christian life means having no difficulties. But giving an equal emphasis on Christ's promise of never forsaking His followers and His grace to endure hardships is just as important. Also, connecting these seekers with Khmer believers who have experienced persecutions can also be a support for those who really want to believe but feel afraid of the consequent trials.

B. Maintaining Status Quo/Fear of Persecution

The believers feel tremendous pressure to maintain the status quo. Becoming a Christian means disrupting the harmony in one's family and facing persecutions of varying degrees. Conformity is valued higher than non-conformity; keeping the status quo higher than causing conflict. This barrier is inevitable but also can reveal the sincere faith of those who are willing to endure the repercussions of their decision to follow Christ.

C. Attitudes toward Religion

Buddhism (although not practiced in its purest form here) is simultaneous with Cambodian identity. For the majority, religion is not a deep spiritual experience but rather a framework of customs and rituals for making merit, appeasing the spirits, or conducting life events such as weddings and funerals. Many just follow along the expected customs but do not necessarily know the meaning behind them.

A common perspective about religions in general is the idea that all religions are good. Most Khmer are tolerant of the Christian faith; some even admire it, but would rather follow Buddhism for a number of reasons. Some say Buddhism is superior because Buddha was born before Christ was born, but they are unaware that Christ's birth was the incarnation of God who existed infinitely before the beginning of the world. Aside from this misconception, many reason that if all religions are good, then why would one even want to change faith, especially if embracing the Christian faith meant disrupting family harmony and receiving social persecution.

There is a new outlook among university students. They say that they believe in science and not in Christianity because they accept the big bang theory and the theory of evolution as facts. Thus, they question the existence of Creator God. Secular education from the West has infiltrated this upcoming generation and thus transferred a barrier to the Gospel. However, this can be countered by the same apologetics used to defend the faith back in the West.

III. Perception of Christianity

A. Misconceptions

There are many misconceptions about Christianity. "Christianity is the Westerner's religion. Jesus is the foreigner's God. Christians hate and disobey their parents. Christians laugh and smile at their funerals." Sometimes, it is not the Khmer perception of Christianity but rather our presumptions that serves as a barrier. For example, an M may presume that a Christian's joy and hope even in the event of the death of another Christian would draw Khmer non-believers to the Gospel. In actuality, the Khmer non-believer sees that expressed joy at a funeral is inappropriate and disrespectful. Thus, rumors such as "Christians don't mourn at their funerals" and other rumors of misinformation about the Christian faith have been sown into the Khmer worldview. Nevertheless, these misconceptions can be dispelled in the context of loving relationships in which gentle, respectful dialogue with a non-believer can clarify these points of misunderstanding and turn them into opportunities to share the Gospel.

B. Patron-Client Dynamic

Some superficially follow Christianity in order to maneuver into a patron-client relationship. Associating with foreigners elevates their social standing because it means access to resources such as money, services, or jobs. In return, they offer their loyalty to the newly found patron. Although this is an obvious barrier, it sometimes can be a bridge. Some Khmer Christians admit that they began with ulterior motives in following the Christian faith, but then in the process they came to a point of a true conversion experience.

C. Damaged Testimony

Unfortunately, the un-Christ-like behaviors and attitudes of Christian foreigners have hurt the testimony and thus repelled non-believers. For instance, one Khmer gentleman said that he hated Christians because of a past experience. His brother faithfully worked at a Christian NGO. But when his brother became ill and died, the NGO neglected him and his family. Thus, this gentleman stereotyped Christians as heartless users. This example is a good reminder for us to devote ourselves to be Christ-like so as not to become the hindrance for the pre-believer (2 Cor. 6:3).

Beyond the dedication to be blameless and upright before God, there is also the issue of abandoning personal rights with the purpose to avoid "cultural sins." Avoiding cultural sins is in essence being culturally sensitive in our manners so that we can draw people to the Gospel, instead of turning people off. For example, a woman to wear shorts in our culture is not a "theological sin," but wearing shorts in this culture would be a cultural sin and shut down any likelihood of bringing people to Christ.

IV. Communication Gap

Sometimes a presentation of the Gospel to the Khmer contains terms that are misunderstood entirely. What we mean to say is not what they hear from us. Certain jargon for us is crystal clear but has a very different connotation for the Khmer listener. For instance, "eternal life" is not a desirable thing for a Buddhist listener because that term means being locked into an endless cycle of birth and rebirth.

Therefore, one needs to clarify that eternal life is being with God now and then forever more in heaven with Him after we have died. Of course, this requires proclaiming the truth about one life and one death (Hebrews 9:27).

Also the Gospel message has concepts unheard of in their worldview and thus very difficult to comprehend. Concepts such as sin is an offense against God is so abstract because all they have ever known is that one must rely upon oneself to make the merit to get good karma. Avoiding sin is to avoid bad karma not a violation against a God who holds individuals accountable to their actions and will administer justice accordingly. There are many other biblical concepts which are obscure in this culture such as 1) separation from a Creator God due to sin, 2) God wants to be reconciled with man because He desires a personal relationship with man, 3) God loves man 4) God has provided a sacrifice-substitute for man's sins, etc.

This certainly presents a challenge, but a bridge to fill this gap is the tool of Bible storying because actually the Judeo-Christian culture of Bible times is close to Cambodian life. Village life, a fisherman's life, a farmer's life, oppression by Rome, beggars, widows, etc. are images that resemble Khmer history and Khmer life now. Stories with these local links can help Khmer to grasp Bible truths so that they can come to faith. For instance, if one desires to portray the truth of God's desire to reconcile Himself with all people, one can tell the Christmas story in Matthew and Luke and then ask leading questions such as "Why would the birth announcement of the royal Son of God first be proclaimed to the common, simple folks like shepherds?" Using this question can guide them to a familiar Khmer cultural understanding that common, ordinary folks would never dare to approach a person of royal status unless invited. But it is absolutely the right of royalty to approach anyone they wish. The hierarchy of class systems and its social rules are well understood in Khmer culture. Thus, Christ's birth announcement made to simple shepherds is a culturally relevant illustration of how the Lord desires to reach out to all people and is willing to take the initiative to do so.

V. Lifestyle Issues

Many struggle on a day-to-day basis and thus are pre-occupied with the "here and now." It is a matter of survival. Those in dire circumstances feel hopeless and depressed and fall easily into traps of alcoholism, drugs, or gambling. A Gospel presentation that focuses only on the "there and then" therefore is a barrier to these people. Therefore, a presentation that includes an emphasis on *what God can be and can do for them right now as well as for their future* can be a bridge. Christian charity in the forms of development work or sharing of resources can also open doors to the Gospel but must be wisely planned and carried out in such a way as to truly help without hurting the people in the long-run. Outlooks of despair and apathy to spiritual matters are not unique to Khmer culture, but there are some dynamics unique to Khmer worldview. The history of genocide has inflicted deep wounds in the hearts of people and has caused ripples in today's society. There is unresolved grief and guilt from the traumatic chapter of Cambodia's history. There are economic hardships, broken families, domestic violence, corruption, a high number of widows and orphans, etc. There is an undercurrent of survival instinct --"law of the jungle" and "survival of the fittest" mentality still at large as people feel hardpressed in their current socioeconomic conditions. These dynamics could very well serve as a bridge to meet people where they are in their brokenness, especially in the context of meaningful, loving relationships so that the Gospel we want to present can be tangible in how we relate to them. A message of healing and abundant life in the "here and now" as well as the message of salvation to come would be a more complete presentation and relevant bridge to the One who freely offers these all to them.

ADDITIONAL BRIDGES:

Aside from the bridges mentioned above which correspond to a particular barrier, the following are other connections to the Gospel.

1. Spiritual Weapons

Before building bridges, the barrier of spiritual strongholds needs to be dealt with first. The spiritual weapons that God has provided are prayer, faith, hope, love, His Word, and His Spirit (2 Cor. 10: 3-5, Eph. 6:13-18). These are necessary to pierce through the darkness of any worldview.

2. Testimony of Khmer Christians

Even though there is a relatively young Christian heritage, testimonies of Khmer coming to faith are powerful. A Khmer's personal encounter with the Lord is a powerful witnessing tool that can draw fellow Khmer to faith. The reason why a Khmer comes to believe and receive Jesus is an attention-grabbing story because it exhibits the awesome power and love of God in ordinary lives. There are wonderful accounts of miracles among the Khmer Christians. Furthermore, a testimony of a person who has repented speaks volumes. No one can deny the supernatural power shown in a dramatically changed life. News about amazing testimonies spreads quickly by word of mouth and can move many toward Christ. The words and deeds of Khmer Christians should not be underestimated as a great link for their fellow Khmer to come to faith.

3. Creative Evangelism/Cultural Links

As mentioned before, Bible storying is a good way to bridge Khmer to the Gospel because it is effective in dispelling myths about the Christian faith. It is a non-threatening way to present Bible truths in this culture and speaks with cultural relevance to the Khmer because the culture in Bible times contains elements that resemble Cambodian life. Also incorporating indigenous arts such as music, drama, proverbs, and stories to creatively present the Gospel is a very useful way to communicate Bible concepts that are unknown in their worldview.

4. Power of Observation

Despite the communication gap found in the language and culture barrier between M's and the people, the Khmer are a very observant people. They may not understand what they hear, but they closely watch our lives with curiosity and keenly take mental notes of what we are doing and the manner in which we do them. And as a people who value high morals and virtue and desire true happiness and love, they can be drawn to the Gospel message if the life of the messenger reflects God's light and radiates His warmth.

5. Meaningful Relationships

Truth is transferred by trusted individuals, not necessarily by sifting through ideologies. Most people will open and engage in discussions about heart matters if they respect and trust Christian foreigners. A safe haven of a true friend who does not use or condemn them or make them feel inferior is a bridge of many opportunities to share the Gospel.