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CAMBODIAN-AUSTRALIAN WELFARE COUNCIL OF NSW INC.

Cambodian Cultural Information



**For Age Care Service Providers:
Special Focus on Khmer Aged Population**

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Disclaimer

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Introduction

This resource has been mainly produced as a support resource to assist mainstream aged care service providers in NSW with their service delivery to the older Cambodian community. The resource consists of relevant information about Cambodian socioeconomic, cultural elements and Khmer elders' life style.

In year 2006, Cambodian Australian Welfare Council Inc received funding from the Department of Health and Ageing under the Community Partnership Program. This resource was one of the outcomes achieved from the CPP project work plan.

This resource has been developed in three sections. The first part of the resource describes demographical information about Cambodia. Followed by socio economic data and the final last section describe information on general Cambodian cultural life style and issues relevant to Khmer elders.

It is very important to understand the difficult journey most of the older Cambodians have travelled through. They have lived through an extreme difficult period of history during their youth, those traumatic experiences and transition has had a huge effect on their emotional and physiological wellbeing.

Cambodia is a country, which has gone through many governments and has been ruled by various dictator regimes. After independence from the French in the early 1950s it was then followed by Lon Nol Regime. Five years later in April 1975 Khmer Rouge took over the country. During this period almost all Cambodians suffered from many cruel atrocities and human rights abuses. As an outcome of ongoing war the community was faced with severe starvation, health related problems and loss of human life.

During this period a quarter of the total population died due to health related problems and as a result of war crimes. During the 1980s and early 1990s, men continued to serve as soldiers. This was particularly evident in rural areas where one could enter a village and find no men between the ages of about 15 and 50. During these times women played a key role in caring, domestic duties including generating financial income.

Most of the Khmer elders who have witnessed and suffered through this traumatic period have migrated to various countries. However the difficulties, losses and memories have not faded from their mind. Unlike some other migrant communities, Khmer community is not well represented in the mainstream sector.

Most of the information for this resource book has been gathered from community consultations, face to face interviews, and internet resources and through literature search.

Cambodia's Geography and Population

Cambodia is a unique country which has its own language, alphabet, culture, tradition and custom. If you see the map of the Cambodia, it is situated on the North Eastern Shore of the Gulf of Siam and bounded by Thailand on the North and West, Laos on the North-East, and Vietnam on the East and South East.

Map of Cambodia



Cambodia is a very small country-approximately 181,035 sq Km. The country is divided into 23 provinces and the capital city of Cambodia is Phnom Penh.

Population

According to the Cambodia Inter- Census Population Survey (CIPS) 2004, population has been estimated at 12.824 million. 80-90% of the population was Cambodians and 10-20% was Chinese, Vietnamese and Cham. Between the years of 1975-1979 the era of Khmer holocaust, almost half of the populations were killed during Pol Pot's regime. Cambodia became well known to the world as the country of the Killing Fields.

Climate

Cambodia is a warm country. The temperatures range from 17 degrees to 38 degree C. The warmest month is April. The coldest month is December and January. In Cambodia there are two seasons: rainy session and dry season. The rainy season starts from May to October and the dry season starts from November to April.

Cambodian History Timeline & Facts

600's -1500's the Khmer civilization

1863- Cambodia becomes a protectorate of French and became part of French Indo - China French colonial rule lasts for 9 years

1941-1945- Cambodia is occupied by Japan during World War 11

1946- France re-imposes its protectorate

1953- Cambodia declares independence from France

1953- Becomes the Kingdom of Cambodia

1965-Head of state Sihanouk breaks off relations with the US

1965- North Vietnamese guerrillas to set up bases in Cambodia to pursue their campaign the US- backed government in South Vietnam

1970- Sihanouk is disposed

1975-The Khmer Rouge, led by Pol Pot, occupy Phnom Penh

1975-Cambodia is re-named Democratic Kampuchea

1976-The country is re-named Democratic Kampuchea

1977-Fighting breaks out with Vietnam

1978-Vietnamese forces invade Cambodia

1979- January- The Vietnamese take Phnom Penh

1979-Pol Pot and Khmer Rouge forces flee to the borders with Thailand

1989- Vietnamese troops withdraw

1989-The country is re-named the state of Cambodia

1997- The Khmer Rouge put Pol Pot on trial and sentenced him to life imprisonment

1998- Pol Pot dies

1994 till now- elections held every 5 years

Demographic variable of Cambodians

Ethnic Groups in Cambodia

Khmer

Among all Cambodian ethnic groups Khmer are the largest ethnic group in Cambodia. They constitute more than 96.2% of the population (Ministry of Commerce, 1998). They live throughout Cambodia, mostly settled in fairly permanent villages, in most of the central and southeastern Cambodian villages.

Khmer community has many common ties of ancestry, culture, language and religion. Most Cambodians are Theravada Buddhist and they are involved in farming, animal raising, handicraft and fishing. In Khmer social life, the notion of hierarchy exists as a guiding principle, therefore their social relations are in hierarchical order.

The social demand for certain or conservative behavioral pattern is much stricter for women than men and in particular for young women than older women.

Cham

In Cambodia compared to other ethnic groups Cham population is 2.1%. The Cham people in Cambodia descended from refugees of the kingdom of Champa. Ethnically and linguistically the Cham are Malayo-Polynesian. Over the centuries, the Cham have intermarried with Malaysian Muslims, who have migrated to Cambodia.

Cambodian Cham community follows the Islamic religion and they can be divided into two groups, orthodox and traditional. These groupings are based on their religious practices.

Cham communities retain their ancestral language, mainly as an oral tradition, but they commonly speak Bahasa Malay among themselves. The orthodox Cham community is mainly located in the Phnom Penh-Oudong, in the provinces of Takeo and in Kampot. The traditional Chams were scattered throughout the midsection of the country in the provinces of Battambang, Kompong Thom, Kornpong Cham, Kompong Chhnang and Pursat. The Chams of both groups typically live in villages along the shores of watercourses or they live inland.

The Cham community, which lives besides the river villages, engages in fishing and growing vegetables. They trade fish to local Khmer farmers for rice. The Cham women in these villages gain income from weaving. The Chams from the inlands earn income from metal working, cultivating fruits and vegetables, all depend on the village natural resources. The Chams also work as butchers of cattle for their Khmer Buddhist neighbors. Between 1975-1979, the Cham communities suffered with sever persecution and many were exterminated however they rebuilt their lives after this period.

Khmer Leur or Hill Tribe

Khmer Leur population 0.2% compared to other ethnic population. They are the 'highlander or hill tribe' in Cambodia. The Khmer Leur community comes from North Eastern provinces of Ratanakiri, Stung Treng, Mondulakiri and Kratie. Most of these community members live in scattered temporary villages that have only a few hundred inhabitants.

These villages usually are governed by the council of local elders or by a village headman. The Khmer Leur cultivate a wide variety of plants, but the main crop is dry or upland rice grown by the slash and burn method.

Khmer Leur finds their daily food by fishing, hunting and through gathering supplement from cultivates vegetable food. The major Khmer Leur groups in Cambodia are Kuy, Phnong, Stieng, Brao, Por, Jarai and Rade. The Jarai and Rade speak an Mslayo- Polynesian language.

This hill tribe of Cambodia have been isolated from mainstream Khmer therefore there is little mutual understanding between these communities.

Khmer Chinese

The Cambodian Chinese are another ethnic minority in Cambodia. Compared to other ethnic groups their population is 0.5%. Many Cambodian Chinese have been living in the country for many centuries and have adapted Khmer culture, language and other identities.

60% of the Chinese Cambodians are urban dwellers engaged mainly in business. The other 40% percent are rural residents working as shop keepers, rice processors, palm sugar production workers, money lenders and fish and fruit sellers. According to a study it is estimated that 90% of the Cambodian Chinese population are involved in business.

In rural villages, many Chinese Cambodians are money lenders therefore they have a economic power over other ethnic Khmer peasants.

The Chinese in Cambodia represent five major groups such as Teochiu, Cantonese, Hokkien, Hakka and Hainanese.

The Teochiu is the largest group among this five sub groups, accounting for about 60% of the whole Chinese population. The Cantonese Chinese are about 20% and the Hokkien Chinese is about 7%. Compared to other Chinese sub groups Hakka and Hainanese are smallest in size they fall into 6.5% of the whole Chinese population.

Vietnamese Community

In relation to other ethnic groups in Cambodia the Vietnamese population is a very small percentage compared to the overall population. In Cambodia Vietnamese communities are scattered throughout South Eastern and Central parts of Cambodia. Many Cambodian Vietnamese live in urban centres like Phnom Penh but some still live along the lower Mekong and Bassac rivers as well as on the shores of the tonle Sap. They also live in Kandal, Preg Veng, Kompong Cham Kompong provinces.

Most Cambodians see Khmer culture and Vietnamese culture as two different cultures. The Vietnamese differ from the Khmer in clothing, in kinship arrangements and in many other ways. Vietnamese belong to the Mahayana Buddhist religion and Cambodian belong to a Theravada Buddhist

However Vietnamese in Cambodia have some commonalities with Cambodian Chinese cultural practices. Many Vietnamese in Cambodia can speak Khmer.

Khmer Krom

The Cambodians who migrated from Southern Vietnam are called Khmer Krom. The community is not well represented to the mainstream sector as some other migrant communities. Due to historical deals and Vietnamese encroachment they were separated from Cambodian citizens.

There is no accurate estimate of the Khmer Krom population in Cambodia. The Cambodian Government sees Khmer Krom as illegal entrants of their border. However Khmer Krom see themselves as culturally Khmer, even though they may dress as Vietnamese and carry a Vietnamese Identity card.

Language

In Cambodia, Khmer is the official language of administration which has its own alphabet consisting of 24 vowels and 33 consonants. There is a slight difference in accent, pronunciation and in the usage of some words from province to province, particularly in the Northern part of Cambodia.

French was widely used as a language of government and higher education. Chinese and Vietnamese were also used in the market places as the languages of bargaining. Even though English was introduced in early 1970's it was not widely spoken by the majority.

Therefore most of the Cambodian people who settled in Australia had to transfer from their learned language skills in Khmer or French, to English, which a great number of the community find difficult to pronounce. For example, s as plural, ed in past tense.

Religion in Cambodian Elders life

Cambodian older people's life revolves around their religious and spiritual beliefs. After reaching old age many Khmer become less active in social gatherings, outings and are less interested in fun activities. For many Khmer elders, ageing is the last part of their journey in life and they tend to see this stage as a religious and spiritual journey. Through spiritual teaching and involvement, they prepare themselves for accepting death and removing attachment.

For Khmer elders', ageing is a stage, where a sense of serenity and passage towards inner harmony has to be achieved.

If you visit Cambodian Buddhist temples, you can see many elders participating in prayers and meditation. During their visit to the temple they also provide their services to monks. This is their daily routine and they get engaged in these activities with commitment and happiness.

After the war, thousands of widows (who had no one to care for them) moved into the Buddhist temples for shelter and support. Through these roles, religion became more connected to the Khmer society.

These beliefs and engagement in spiritualism strengthen their capacity for dealing with the ageing process. For many Khmer Buddhists, life and philosophy behind the Buddhism are inter-connected. Through this process they become less attracted to the materialistic world and family attachment.

Buddhism

In Cambodia, Theravada Buddhism is 96.4% compared to other religions. It is the usual religion of ethnic Khmer. Theravada Buddhism originated from North India and Nepal in the Sixth century. The principle and philosophy behind Theravada Buddhism is tolerance and non prescriptive. They don't believe in a supreme being. According to the fundamental belief it says each individual takes full responsibility for their own actions and omissions.

Buddhist monks have a special place in a Khmer's life, they were given high respect and everyone must move out of the way of monks, and only men are allowed to touch them. Some families invite the monks to their homes for ceremonial events.

In Cambodia, Buddhism has official sanction. Among Vietnamese and Chinese communities Mahayana Buddhism is widely practiced as a religion.

Animism

Animism practiced among Khmer Leu. The Neak Ta mother earth concept is a foundation for animist belief. The principle behind Animism is the supreme energy force uniting the society with its earth and water. The principle acknowledged here is the link between the human and fertility of the soil or land.

Animal sacrifice is commonly practiced among Hill Tribes due to their belief in Animism. They perform animal sacrifices to the spirit of the forest during any special events such as marriage, construction of a new house, moving to new villages. In these ceremonies members of the community participate in a feast.

In situation of illness in the village, an offering sacrifice often takes place before seeing the traditional doctor.

Islam

Majority of the Cham community members belong to the Islamic religion. Compared to other religions, the Islamic population is 2.1%. According to their belief they see individual selves are responsible to Allah. Cham people follow Muslim festivals, holidays and dietary laws in their life style. Due to these beliefs they avoid eating pork.

Christianity

In Cambodia compared to other neighboring countries, Christianity has a limited influence. The whole Christian community is only 0.5% compared to other religious practice composition. There are Chinese, Vietnamese and Khmer who practice Christianity in Cambodia.

Sex

According to Cambodian population census (1998), males accounted for 48.2% and females for 51.8%.

Age

According to the Cambodian 1998 Census report estimation:

0-4 years of age population are 13.4%

5-14 years of age proportion is 30.5%.

15-64 years is 52.6 %

Above 64 populations rate is only 3.5 %

In terms of this proportion we could conclude that there is not a significant aged population in Cambodia compared to other age groups.

Marital status

According to Cambodian current marriage law women should be 18 and over for legal marriage. However in rural Cambodian society women can enter into marriage after the age of puberty. Women from rural provinces get married earlier than urban situations.

According to 1998 census data, married women are 56.6% and single women (over the age of 15) accounts for 26%. Another significant proportion is widowed females accounting for 15.3%.

Most Cambodians value family life as their high priority. The Marriage ceremonies are conducted according to each ethnic communities own customs, traditions and religious background.

The 1998 census also reveals 2.1% of divorce within the whole population.

Socio economic data of Cambodians

Education

The education system in Cambodia was rapidly modernized and extended in the 1950s and 1960s. Many primary and secondary schools were opened in rural areas and universities and other tertiary institutions were established.

The structure of education was based on six years of primary schooling and seven years of secondary education. Secondary schooling was divided into two parts such as college and lycee.

The first 4 years is called college. Subject to their success in the state examination, the student will be entitled to a diploma equivalent to a school certificate in Australia However; they are not entitled to it if they fail the examination.

The standard of the examination was very high, mostly only a quarter of the candidates pass the examination each year. Up to 1969 the examination included very hard written and oral tests.

In Cambodian society women are particularly disadvantaged in educational opportunities; compared to men there is a high level of low literacy level among women. Between the ages of 15 between both sexes, male school enrolment is 50% greater than female, and by age 18 rates of male enrolment are almost 3 times greater than female enrolment. Girls make up roughly half of the students in primary school, but only about a third of students in secondary school and only about 15% of the students in higher education.

Education is free in Cambodia, however paying for school fees, books, clothes and giving the child a bit of spending money, is one of the main yearly expenses for a rural family. Significant numbers of Elders have difficulties in reading and writing in their mother tongue. Many Elders didn't get the opportunity to attend schooling due to war, poverty and family economical status.

After migrating to Australia many Elders are facing difficulties in communicating in English. This language barrier is another factor which is causing social marginalization and isolation. Generally Cambodian community gives high priority to educational achievements.

Gender role in Cambodian society

Generally women are ranked within the social hierarchy based upon their fulfillment of cultural ideals. These ideals about the proper behavior for women are elaborated in great detail through codes of moral conduct. Women demonstrate their high status through proper behavior.

In Cambodian families in most circumstances women manage the finances and house hold matters. She must act as an advisor to her husband as well as be his servant. Women status mostly depends on their family status. After marriage it is shaped according to her husband's status.

Occupation

Cambodia's economy is based mainly on agriculture. It produces rice, maize, rubber, pepper, palm sugar, soya bean, tobacco, cotton and silk. Until the 1970's, the country's farm production was usually high enough to provide for the Cambodian people and export to other countries. Rice and corn were the main food crops. In addition, Cambodia produced large quantities of rubber for exportation. Many farms and rubber plantations were destroyed during the Vietnam War and the civil war in Cambodia. The Cambodian economy also provides fuel as well as providing building material for houses and boats.

A person's occupation largely depends on his or her educational level. Generally, Cambodian women have lower levels of education compared to men and very few women are legislators, senior officials and managers.

The highest percentages of employed persons are engaged in agriculture, hunting and forestry. The Ton Le Sap, the great fresh water lake in Cambodia, also dominates Cambodian life and the economy. It provides 130,000 tonnes of fresh water fish each year. The fish are dried, salted, smoked or fermented for the production of prahok, a staple of the Cambodian diet.

Life Style of Cambodians

Cambodian family unit

Traditionally the family has been regarded as the basic and important unit in Cambodian Society. The family is usually much extended, composing old grandparents, parents and unmarried children. Families mostly stick together and solve problems collectively. When dealing with problems family members consult with Elders for their wisdom and experience. In most cases grand parents live in the same home with the last child of the family. For many Cambodians life is centered on family, faith and food.

The extended family collectively celebrate success, weddings, births, deaths, festivals, disappointments, mourning for death and any other special occasions. The strength of the Cambodian family unit is considered to be its unity, harmony and collective action.

The Khmer society is hierarchal in many aspects of social structure. People often refer to each other by kinship terminology that reflects the age and sex of the person. In terms of status, age is more important than sex therefore elders are more highly respected in the society than other younger family members.

It is also important to recognize the overriding importance of the birth order in a family unit.

Generally men are the heads of the household, however due to the human losses and internal displacement after the war many households are headed by widowed, divorced, or separated women.

Extended families usually are headed by an older parent or grandparent. However, the change after migration has shifted the power and responsibilities more towards younger family members.

Cambodian elder's health practices and beliefs

In general, the Khmer elders are comfortable with cosmopolitan or western medicine and with traditional or indigenous healing practices, both spiritual and medicinal (and often both). Traditionally Cambodian elders dealt with their illness through their own self care and self-medication. Due to the cost factor and limitation of health care facilities in Cambodia (especially in rural areas) many of them try home remedies/ treatment before seeking assistance from health practitioners.

In Cambodia, herbs are often grown in a home garden. A Khru Khmer (traditional healer) may be sought who will often travel into the jungle for herbs, roots and plants for healing. Like Vietnamese, Cambodians have some common remedies for a range of ailments. In order to restore balance by releasing excessive wind they use remedies: such as cupping, pinching and rubbing. According to them this excessive wind is believed to cause illness in the body.

Mostly Khmer elders are slow to seek healthcare due to transport difficulties, and tolerance of illness/discomfort. Due to language difficulties and trust many Cambodian elders prefer to work with medical professionals from their own cultural background.

Due to their past difficulties in Cambodia many of the Khmer refugees have experienced poor health. The contributing factors were deprivation of food, shelter and medical care. Some of the common illnesses experienced by Cambodians are hepatitis B, tuberculosis, diabetes and intestinal diseases.

Mental illness

In Cambodian society mental illness is often denied and feared. When a Family member becomes mentally ill, others tend to hide the information about the person from outsiders due to shame. Some Cambodians understand mental illness as possession by spirits or as an effect of a bad karma from past lives.

Many elders stay away from anti-depressants because they are afraid they may become addicted. Many Khmer elders are not familiar with Counseling and therapeutic concepts this makes it difficult for them to approach psychologists and counselors.

Cambodians who have emotional /mental health problems tend to present themselves with physical illnesses. Not all Cambodians like to discuss their experiences in Pol Pot regime due to reasons such as confidentiality and difficult memories. Many Cambodians think by not sharing their experiences with others they are in the process of forgetting and healing.

During the times of emotional crisis/difficulties many Khmer Elders become depended on religious and spiritual beliefs. They actively participate in spiritual practices such as temple prayers and meditations to find inner harmony. In these times they seek for emotional support from their own family support.

However many Elders may fall into isolation, hopelessness and dealing with trauma internally. They may be unaware of services and support they can access. According to research findings, Cambodians have shown a very high risk for psychiatric symptoms because of their past collective traumatic experiences. These experiences include witnessing war, separation from and death of family members, cultural destruction, torture, and starvation. The effect of a high level of trauma has created symptoms of PTSD (Posttraumatic stress disorder) Symptoms.

Some of these symptoms are re-experience of the trauma, recurrent intrusive recollections, recurrent dreams and nightmares, acting out or feeling as if the traumatic event were recurring, social numbness or withdrawal, hyper alertness or hyperactive startle reaction, sleep disorders, guilt, memory impairment and avoidance of activities that arouse recollection of the event (Kinzie et al., 1984).

Belief in Spirits

Cambodian Elders from rural villages have a strong belief in spirits and their influence in individual life. Sometimes they believe illness or sicknesses are caused by spirit possession or evil spells. They seek support from spiritual healers know as “Kru’ if they believe illness is caused by spirit possession. Some Elders wear particular string or metal chain (amulets) on their body as a protection from evil spirits. These amulets are kept in the prayers to attain power.

Meditation and prayers

Among Cambodian elders temple worship is highly valued, they also have a altar at home for prayers. Temple worships are led by one or more of the monks. Elderly people participate in worship through chanting and meditation. When you visit Buddhist temples you can see Khmer elders participating in group meditation and prayer activities. During meditation they use breathing (Buddhist dictionary- Anapana Sati) techniques to calm their mind.

Most Cambodian Buddhist Elders have their own chanting books for prayers. Many Elders feel through participating in these activities they feel relaxed and inner harmony is achieved.

Relaxation

Among Cambodian Elders, listening to the radio is very common, compared to television and newspaper reading. They enjoy listening to their own traditional music. They often like to spend their time with their own family members and friends. Due to their cultural experiences in extended, families they find it very difficult to cope with isolation and loneliness.

Caring for Cambodian Elders

In most circumstances, Cambodian elders live with their children. Children feel it is their responsibility and duty to care for their parents. In situations such as when elders don't have children then they live with their relatives.

After the migration process many Cambodian families are facing difficulties in caring for their Elders due to new life style changes and responsibilities. These changes are challenging some of their traditional values and roles. However choosing residential care as an option is still a huge challenge for many Cambodians.

Many Cambodians feel uncomfortable, guilt and shame in sending their Elders to residential care. They are keener to work with home care services and other alternative support systems before considering residential care.

Cambodian Elders challenges in residential care services

Many Cambodian Elders have very limited English language skills therefore they feel they will be more isolated in a residential care setting. Most Elders prefer to live in a very similar cultural environment, where they can enjoy the last part of their life time.

Food is another important element in a Cambodian Elders' life they often, find it very difficult to taste or accept other cultural food. Most of these community members are not familiar with residential care services therefore there is an unknown fear and taboo around this issue. In this community, the cost of services is a factor which works as a barrier towards accessing residential care services.

Dying and death

Cambodian Elder's lives are often filled with religious and spiritual principles. These principles and life values assist them towards a harmonious ageing journey and peaceful dying process.

Many are Elderly migrants (lived more than half of their life time in another land and escaped from Holocaust) and dying in another country can sometimes cause a wide range of emotional sufferings. Such emotions can be like survivors guilt and guilt over decisions made during Holocaust.

In Cambodia dying mostly happens at home (the body may keep at home for one day). This offers family members an opportunity to share grief and sadness collectively. At the same time this provides opportunities for visitation and religious ceremonies. In the process of treatment withdrawal it is important for medical professionals to consult with family members about these issues.

Generally the funeral ceremony happens according to the families' religious practices. Family members collectively make decisions about funeral proceedings. After the death the body should be washed and prepared by the family. The hands are placed in the prayer position. Candles and incense are placed in the hands. Some families sometimes place a coin in the mouth of the deceased. In most circumstances cremation is preferred in Cambodian culture though some may have different preferences. Ceremonies are usually held the weekend after the death and again at 100 days after the death.

According to Cambodian culture after the funeral ceremonies, friends and family members visit the family and make a money contribution

Food

Food is a most important part of a Cambodian's life. There is a common saying Khmer life is centered on family, faith and food. Cambodian food has lots of influence from Thai and Lao cuisine. It also has incorporated Chinese and Vietnamese cuisine. But Cambodian food has its own individual taste and uniqueness.

White rice continues as a main staple with accompanying soup. Some additional favorites include: fish, shrimp, stir fried vegetables and the following vegetables: eggplant, cauliflower, broccoli, string beans, sweet potatoes, pumpkin, Thai okra, and watercress.

Cambodians prefer fish dishes more than meat. Hot and sour fish soup with pineapple and splash of spice and gingered flavored pork soups are some of their favorites. They use lemon grass in much of their cooking.

Even though, rice and fish dishes play a key role in Cambodian diet, salad dishes are also popular. One of the well known Cambodian salad is called Phlea Sut Ko which is a beef and vegetable salad flavored with mint, lemon grass and lemon juice.

In most cases Cambodian Elders prefer their own ethnic food. They are not very comfortable tasting new cultural food. During meetings and in a residential care environment it is important to provide them with their own ethnic food. Cambodian Elders often consider having their own ethnic food is a very important aspect of their life. Among Khmer Elders, rice porridge and sour fish soups are popular.

Cambodians are fond of fruit:

- Mangoes
- Bananas
- Jackfruit
- Ramputan
- Lychees
- Durians
- Pineapple
- Pomegranate
- Tamarind
- Mangostein
- Rockmelon

In Cambodia, tea is a national drink, due to the heat and humidity in the climate they often have lots of fresh juices, fruit shakes and soft drinks. Very few Cambodians are vegetarian.

Food preparation

Food preparation is an enjoyable and important task in Khmer women's lives.

Women especially play a key role in preparing the food for their families. The majority of men feel food preparation is a women's job. Many Khmer elderly women enjoy preparing their own meal. For them, preparing their own meal for them and for their family is a very important task of the day. However if they live with their children and have difficulty in physical functioning, then the children will provide them with food, health care support and other needs.

Belief about food

Generally Cambodians categories the food into the two elements, such as hot and cold. According to them these food elements can heat the body or cool the body. For example they consider fruits and vegetables are cold natured.

They believe the body operates in a delicate balance between two opposite elements which are hot and cold therefore an excess of hot elements or cold elements could disturb physiology and can cause illness or health related problems.

Eating habits

Cambodians eat three meals a day. During their meals, especially during dinner the whole family joins to eat. They may use floor mats and sit on the floor or at the table. They commonly use plates with a fork and spoon.

Sometimes they use chopsticks and chopstick bowls. It depends on what is being eaten. They also include a small dish at the top on the right hand side for dipping sauce.

Cultural Communication pattern

Most Cambodians like to be called "Khmer" or "Cambodians". Some may get upset if they are called Kampuchans (it is a Khmer word for Cambodia).

Cambodians write their surname first followed by their middle then first name. Cambodian married women retain their maiden name and do not add their husband's name to their own. Chinese Cambodian children take their Grandfather's (father's father) family name as their last name.

When pronouncing a Cambodian name, it is important to understand the pronunciation of their name because some Cambodians tend to not recognize their names if it is said differently. This is an issue in Australia because very often they were spelled in French when put into Roman script. Therefore it is not pronounced as it looks in English.

When addressing a patient or client it is important to call their name with the title such as Ms, Mrs, Mr and Doctor.

Sometimes when Cambodians communicate among themselves they don't address each other by names but by titles according to the relationship or age factor. They will call the other person brother, sister or uncle, Sir or madam is often used for strangers.

Khmer Body language

Many Cambodians find it insulting or uncomfortable when someone touches their head. According to them the head is the most important part of the body where the spirit is found.

Feet are considered the lowest part of the body and it is rude to point them at someone. Pointing fingers at someone is also considered very rude.

When walking in front of Elders, Cambodians bow slightly from the waist as a sign of the respect. Cambodians don't maintain eye contact with older people or superiors as part of respect for them, which is the opposite of what Australians expect and leads us to believe we are being dishonest.

Khmer Social Interaction Style

Buddhist Cambodians are strongly influenced by Buddhist teaching of quiet, disciplined acceptance of pain. Therefore in many circumstances Cambodians often look reasonably calm, content and seldom complain. Therefore workers need to ask them relevant questions to identify the problem/needs to support a client effectively.

When working with Cambodians it is important to ask simple direct questions rather than complex indirect questions it may create more confusion and they may find it difficult to respond. It is also wiser to deal with health related problems or issues one at a time to avoid confusion.

Cambodians give high respect to superiors and professionals. Therefore when we give advice or information they may say "yes" without questioning the professional treatment process. However it is a professionals' responsibility to clarify her/his understanding about the instruction or matter.

Most Cambodians don't wear footwear inside their house so if there is pile of shoes at a door, visitors should also remove their shoes before going through the door.

They like to offer food and drink to their visitors it is important for them to respect visitors. In most circumstances older people are greeted first before younger ones.

Khmer community members very rarely communicate direct it is mostly indirect and requests or questions may be couched in seemingly vague terms. It is unusual for older people to make a direct "no" response to a question or request.

Before responding to questions Khmer Elders may wait or take their own time to explain or respond therefore it is important to wait for their response calmly.

Greetings

Cambodians traditionally greet each other with the "Sumpeah", which involves pressing the hands together in front of the body and bowing, similar to the "wai" in Thailand.

The higher the hands are raised and the lower the bow, the more respect is conveyed. It is important to remember to greet with “Sumpeah” when meeting the officials and elderly. Younger people are expected to greet older person first.

Marriage system

Arranged marriages are still quite common, they are disproportionately prevalent among wealthier Khmer. Daughters in wealthier families have less ability to negotiate their own marriage and are often more obligated to submit to family arrangements which ensure the social status of marriage partners.

After marriage, Khmer express a stated preference for going to live with the family of the bride. Traditionally a man would have had to do bride service of two or three years for the bride’s family before the wedding. The young man would have lived with and worked for the girl’s family, so they would have known him well. Khmer say that this pattern is safer for the girl who is afraid to leave her family.

Religious festivals

Khmer life is filled with many religious festivals. These festivals play a very important element in their life. Especially for Elders, religious and festival days are special days and they make time to visit the temple. After the temple prayers community members meet with each other to socialize and eat together at the temple.

Pchum Ben

This event happens in the month of September of every year. During this festival Buddhist Khmers prepare food at home and offer to the temple monks, as an offering to the ancestors.

On this day family members remember their ancestors and other people who lost their lives in the Cambodian war. Through this communal participation, community members also deal with their own loss, pain and healing.

Khmer New Year (13th April -15th April)

Khmer New Year is very special for Cambodians. On this day community members take cooked food to the temple and take part in special temple prayers. Temples conduct special prayers for community prosperity and hope. During these days, people visit their relatives and neighbours’ houses. The two days offer much entertainment such as traditional games, dancing and performances.

Thngai Sul (Days there is no moon in the sky)

Thngai Sul is a weekly religious day marked on the calendar. On this day Khmer people make visits to the temple in the morning for prayers and to learn about Buddhist theory. They take cooked food to the temple as their offerings.

Thngai Peng Bauw (Full moon days)

Khmers consider these days as auspicious times and they visit the temple for prayers. During their visit to the temple they take cooked food to offer to the monks.

Traumatic memories

Loss and grief

Cambodians elders have gone through many psychological traumas in their life. The migration process and displacement process soon after those experiences never gave the opportunity for them to deal with those past traumas. Their strong belief towards religion and spiritual aspects has helped them to cope and mourn with those losses. Compared to women, Cambodian men may feel difficulties in expressing their trauma experience due to cultural aspects.

Migration

The First Cambodian family migrated to Australia in 1940s. In 1976, 500 Cambodians were living in Australia. In 1986 the Cambodian born population had risen to around 13,500. Most of them migrated under the humanitarian visa entry.

Khmer elders challenges in Australia

Language

One of the biggest challenges for Cambodian Elders is communicating in English. This is due to factors such as lack of familiarity of the English language in their home land, literacy levels, learning difficulties in a new country. Many Cambodian Elders rely on their children and other family members for interpreting /language support.

Lack of knowledge about services

Due to language difficulties and late age migration many Elders have very little knowledge about current social care systems especially about age care services. In most situations they prefer to work with Khmer workers or interpreters when dealing with any social service or governmental departments for any support.

Transport support

Khmer Elders face difficulties in accessing social groups and support services due to a lack of transport support. They have difficulty accessing public services due to language difficulties. The lack of transport support creates social isolation, marginalization and dependency problems among Khmer Elders.

Minority group

The Cambodian community is still a minority community compared to other immigrant communities. Therefore they are a minority whose voices and needs are not represented fully to the mainstream sector. Equally the community also faces a lack of resources, in participating or contributing to current social planning. As a minority group Cambodian Elderly issues are not heard or represented in the mainstream sector.

Past trauma effect and memories loss

Most Cambodians over the age of 30 have lived through the reign of Pol Pot. Therefore they have experienced dislocation, torture and trauma, rape, starvation, solitary confinement and forced separation from families. For many older people these past experiences can still be painful or un-dealt with. As they move into old age, these unresolved memories and issues affect their memory and resurface again.

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