

Respecting Hermeneutical Space

# Can Cambodian Christians “Worship” their Parents? A Hermeneutical Dialogue

By Claire T. C. Chong and Tep Samnang

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Communicating and expressing the gospel in a meaningful way is not an easy task in cross-cultural contexts. There are several barriers of communication, and contextualisation has been heralded as a way to overcome some of these obstacles. However, the gap between theory and practice that Darrell Whiteman alluded to more than two decades ago does not appear to have significantly closed. At three separate forums, in the beginning of this year, Asian thought leaders were still appealing to mission practitioners in Asia to do contextualisation.

This presentation is a reflection on some promising activities in Cambodia in the last few years. By creating communities of dialogical practice, the Cambodian church is inching forward in crafting a distinct Khmer Christian identity. It is hoped that this report may encourage others to persevere in exploring and experimenting with new localised expressions of faith for the sake of the Gospel.

I shall turn this time over to Pastor Tep Samnang to share about what our research team is doing in Cambodia.

## ***Can Cambodians Bow to their Parents? A Grassroots Study (Tep Samnang)***

My name is Tep Samnang. In 2016, during my service as the Executive Director of the Evangelical Fellowship of Cambodia, we started a “Faith and Culture Committee,” a group which consists of heads of denominations, principals of seminaries, and leaders of Christian organizations. We do research on contextual theology and organise forums in different provinces to engage with pastors all over Cambodia. Recently, we just completed our research on “The Christian Wedding Ceremony according to Cambodian Culture” and have just published it in a book. We are currently doing research for Birth and Death Ceremonies.

Today, I would like to present another research project, one I conducted with Rev. Lun Sophy and Rev. Prak Vuthy, along with Ms. Claire Chong. It involves the Khmer tradition of bowing to parents and asks: Can Cambodian Christians bow to our parents?

According to Khmer customs, Cambodians ritually demonstrate our respect to our parents, and also to royalty and monks, by bowing to them—this ritual act is called *tvaibongkum*.

However, among Christians, the Cambodian word *tvaibongkum* is translated into English and understood as “worship.” This poses a problem. Prohibiting Cambodian Christians from “worshipping” or bowing to their parents is a stumbling block for the Gospel.

Our research team spoke with several elders of our community and also with Buddhist monks and temple leaders. We also discussed this problem with several church leaders.

We recognised that the word *tvaibongkum* in the Khmer language and according to Khmer thinking means to pay respect. In the Khmer-English dictionary *tvaibongkum* is defined as “to greet; say hello to; to pay respects or homage, venerate, make obeisance.”

To better appreciate this, we need to understand the structure of the Cambodian language. The Cambodian language operates on a social-linguistic register; this signifies that one meaning is represented by different words depending on with whom you are talking. For example, there are at least ten Khmer words for ‘eat’ depending on with whom you are speaking.

Similarly, there are different Khmer words for “respect.” In Khmer thinking, the word and act of *tvaibongkum* does not mean worship in the Christian sense. *Tvaibongkum* is an example of how a word can have two different meanings in different contexts.

Our research team also found that some Christian leaders in Cambodia think that it is all right to bow before our parents. I will cite three examples of how different leaders do it.

1. In one church, the pastor taught the youths the Khmer tradition of *tvaibongkum* and explained to them that while this is the cultural way of demonstrating respect, as Christians we worship only one God.
2. In another church, Christians go on their knees and present gifts to their parents or elders of the church. They *sompiah* (hands together in prayer position) but do not bow three times.
3. In a Christian school, the children are taught to kneel before their parents and wash their parents’ feet. The non-Christian parents greatly appreciate what is being taught at this Christian school.

In all three case studies, the leaders of the churches and school are well-respected godly men and women with thriving and vibrant ministries. These examples are models of contextualised practice and show us that it is possible to uphold Khmer traditions as Christians.

However, the linguistic explanation and models of contextual practices were not sufficient to persuade Cambodian pastors. So we studied Scripture and did a word study of the Hebrew word *shachah*.

The linguistic explanation was not sufficient to persuade the Cambodian pastors. So we studied Scripture.

The Bible clearly teaches us that we are to *shachah* (worship) God and God alone, and that we must not worship (*shachah*) idols and pagan gods.

However, and very interestingly, the same Hebrew word *shachah* is also used numerous times in reference to other humans, and not only to God. Brother bowed to brother, subjects bowed to kings, friend bowed to good friend, and so forth.

Children bowed to parents. Joseph *shachah* before his father, Moses *shachah* before his father-in-law Jethro, a Midianite priest, and King Solomon *shachah* before his mother.

This word study shows that *shachah* is used in two ways: as an act of worship to God and also as an act of showing respect to people worthy of respect. This renewed biblical understanding gives the Cambodian church strong justification that it is permissible to bow to our earthly parents and elders and that this act does not equate to worship of God.

In this contextualisation effort, we learned that the Khmer practice of *tvaibongkum* is similar to the Hebrew practice of *shachah*: While contemporary Christianity understands worship in only one way, in the Hebrew and Khmer life worlds, the act of bowing can be used as a reverential salutation and also as an act of worship to God. This is an example of how Cambodian Christians are trying to do contextual theology.

I shall pass this time back to sister Claire.

### *A Relational Hermeneutic (Claire Chong)*

Thank you very much *Lokru* (teacher)!

Having had the privilege to participate in the discussion on the practice of *tvaibongkum*, I’d like to share some reflections on the process of the hermeneutical dialogue. The central point we would like to submit in this presentation is that contextualisation is not merely a linguistic and theological exercise. It is more than just translating a message in terms that are comprehensible to the listeners. Rather, contextualisation

is a social phenomenon, a complex relational negotiation of social dynamics. Because of the intersubjectivities that are involved in contextualisation, certain postures are critical and these postures can influence linguistic and theological decisions. In this presentation, we describe six postures that were identified by analysing the Cambodian case study and comparing it with the classic example of contextualisation in Acts 15.

## *An Emerging Asian Manner of Contextualisation: Six Postures (6Ps)*

### 1. Participatory

First, the Cambodian pastors adopted a participatory approach. According to Hofstede's cultural dimensions, Cambodians may be described as collectivistic. Cambodians thus do not conceive contextualisation as the work of an individual theologian; rather, it is carried out communally. A communal and participatory approach is inclusive; it seeks to involve others and esteems another person's opinion, even if it is different from ours. The account in Acts 15 also demonstrates a participatory approach. A sharp dispute between two competing views on circumcision had broken out (Acts 15:2), and to resolve the issue, the Jerusalem Council was convened before the church and also the party of Pharisees (Acts 15:4, 22). Verse 7 in the same chapter mentions that there was "much discussion" before a carefully negotiated response was crafted (Acts 15:7). Similarly, in the Cambodian case study different "stakeholders," regardless of his/her ideological position, contributed to the contextualisation dialogue. Our research team also spoke with non-Christians, including Buddhist monks. A participatory and inclusive approach is not just to ensure rigorous discussions, but more importantly, so that a shared decision may be collectively crafted and owned. Such a communal approach of contextualisation also builds and establishes positive relationships.

### 2. Practical and Pragmatic

Second, the Cambodian contextual approach is practical and pragmatic: practical in that it deals with concrete life situations rather than theories; pragmatic in that it deals with issues using simple and manageable, rather than complex and abstract, ways. One of the most striking features of the Cambodian contextualisation endeavour is that the whole theological project pivots around rituals—weddings, birth and death rituals, and customary rituals. The theological debate in Acts 15, similarly, revolved around a ritual—circumcision.

Faith practice among Cambodians is not based on what Stanley Tambiah calls scripturalism. Critical textual analysis, abstraction, and formulation of doctrinal concepts is not the

way Cambodians conceive of religion. Ritual, on the other hand, is a Khmer way of faith and life; it is the heart language of the Khmer people. Through its unique language, people learn through enactment, and embody morality and truth. Ritual is also the centre of gravity of communal life where belonging and identity are forged. Unfortunately, ritual is the very aspect of faith and life that Protestant Christians have conventionally ignored, or rather, scorned, because we evaluate it solely through the tenets of religious dogma. We Westernised Christians tend to see ritual purely as a religious category, segregated from all other aspects of life. However, this reductionist perspective does not reflect what ritual means to the Khmers, who view ritual as integral to the whole person and to his or her life *in* community.

Doing contextual theology through ritual may be regarded as an Asian epistemology. A lot of contextualisation currently done revolves around theological and doctrinal theses—possibly a product of the European Enlightenment tradition privileging mind over body, and reason over experience. The primacy of doctrine over ritual may be one explanation for the failure of the contextualisation project in Asia: we could be using the wrong tool for the job.

### 3. Pastoral

Doing contextualisation is not just about acquiring and applying yet another new set of methodological techniques; rather, it is about nurturing a pastoral posture which emanates lovingkindness and compassion—cherished Khmer virtues. In this context, lovingkindness and compassion are expressed as empathetic understanding and sincere appreciation of another culture.

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In the Cambodian contextual approach, exegeting culture is more than intellectually analysing the doctrinal meanings and functions of ritual acts. One needs to intuitively capture the affective meanings as well—the psychological, familial, social, and moral implications. Contextualisation is not a rationalistic and evaluative exercise, assessing "right" from "wrong," whether it follows the Book or not. Rather, it calls for a pastoral disposition toward the other, seeking to appreciate and affirm "whatever is true, noble, right, pure" (Matt. 11:29, Phil. 4:8).

The Jerusalem Council exemplified this pastoral and compassionate posture. In Acts 15, they noted that circumcision made it “difficult for the Gentiles who are turning to God” (vs. 19), because it “troubled and unsettled the [Gentile] minds” (vs. 24). It is apparent that they empathised with how the Gentiles thought and felt about the ritual practice of circumcision. Love superseded orthodoxy.

Similarly, *tvaibongkum* is a profoundly reverential and honourable way of demonstrating respect, gratitude and affection to one’s parents and family elders. Not to do so is an unthinkable behaviour. Cambodians cannot NOT *tvaibongkum* their parents.

#### 4. Perceptive

Fourth, contextualisers should be perceptive or discerning of God at work. One of the key points of Barnabas and Paul’s persuasion in the Acts 15 debate was the evidence of the Presence of God among the uncircumcised Gentiles (vs. 12). Although the Gentiles were not conforming to the religious expressions of Jewish Christians, the Holy Spirit was undeniably moving among them (vs. 7–9, 13, 15, 17, and 28). Similarly, in the *tvaibongkum* project, we see godly men and women of vibrant churches creating innovative ways to redeem the traditional custom of demonstrating reverence to parents. God is at work and doing a new thing; the Christian faith is blossoming in new ways in Khmer soil. Contextualisation involves not only textual analysis, but prayerful discernment of God at work in unfamiliar yet life-giving ways. It invites us to exercise restraint from too quickly labelling something different as heresy or syncretism.

In Buddhist epistemology, perceptive intuition is not an invalid way of knowing. Perceptive intuition is a holistic form of cognition that comes from in-depth contemplation and intuitive reading on lived experiences, resulting in profound insights. This contrasts with Western epistemology which privileges the mind over heart, body, and soul. Interestingly, in Acts 17:27, Paul invited the Athenians to “feel their way toward [God] and find Him.” It is apparent that in the philosophical tradition of the Age of Reason, perception has been dismissed as a *bona fide* pathway of cognition.

#### 5. Pro- and Co-creative

Fifth, we should approach our mission with an attitude of anticipation, expecting something new to be birthed. Contextualisation should be pro-creative and co-creative. The Jerusalem Council saw that God was doing something new among the Gentiles, and what they saw renewed their hermeneutical paradigm and transformed their theological interpretation

Re-reading an old prophecy in an illuminating new way, James redefined what “people of God” meant: from one that was exclusively referring to Israel as God’s chosen, to one that includes “the rest of mankind” and even “all the Gentiles” (Acts 15:17). Similarly, Paul transformed the old interpretation of the doctrine of circumcision. Emphasizing the spirit of the law rather than the letter of the law, he criticized the legalistic demands of physical circumcision and preached on the circumcision of the heart by the Spirit (Rom. 2:25–29).

Instead of imposing predetermined theological conceptions, James and Paul allowed God to transform their long-established theological ideas and renew their doctrinal interpretations. The hermeneutical process that we see here is one that is co-dependent on text and context, one that is deeply rooted in the Word and yet sensitive to the work of the Holy Spirit in the present and God’s continued authorship in writing history.

With this posture and by re-reading Scriptures through Khmer eyes, Cambodians noted with delight how the godly prostrated before their elders and how the Khmer tradition of *tvaibongkum* parallels the Hebrew practice of *shachah*. This Spirit-inspired and biblically-founded interpretation holds profound significance for Christian expression in Asian contexts.

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#### 6. Peaceable

And finally, blessed are the peacemakers for they shall be called sons and daughters of God. In Acts 15, the Jewish Council did not just “repeal” the law of circumcision for the Gentiles, they negotiated a holistic and peacebuilding response. They recommended that the Gentiles follow certain purity codes, so as to maintain the unity of fellowship between Jews and Gentiles. The Council exercised the principle of 1 Corinthians 10:32–33 of not being a stumbling block to Jews, Gentiles, or the church of God. Contextualisation is not merely a theological exercise, it is a relational endeavour, involving an intricate negotiation of relationships among various people, for the purpose of establishing *shalom* in the community.

The core Khmer value of harmony and conflict-avoidance is prominent in the Cambodian contextual process. It leads toward peace-building relations by honouring indigenous socio-cultural norms:

- a) First, deference is given to Christian elders. It took more than a year to seek the endorsement of certain senior pastors. The contextualisation endeavour in Cambodia is owned and led by mainstream players; it is not a fringe activity of a maverick, or a young leader who has been groomed in foreign methods and manners.

- b) Second, honour is given to the Buddhist community. Christian pastors in the *tvaibongkum* project engaged with Buddhist monks and elders in the community, and even explained the Christian dilemma, and sought suggestions from them.
- c) Third, respect is also given to the governing authorities. Khmer pastors are keenly aware of the importance of developing positive relations with the local governing authorities. The book, *Christian Wedding Ceremony according to Cambodian Culture*, was presented as a gift to the Ministry of Cult and Religion to demonstrate Christian cooperation to “Khmerise” Christianity.

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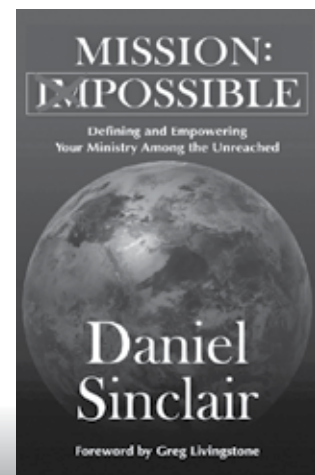
*Envisioning Communities of Relational Hermeneutical and Dialogical Practice*

This Cambodian case study provides some nuanced insights for an innovative practice of contextualisation. Building on the concepts of critical contextualisation passed on to us by Paul Hiebert, we have described here a manner of contextualisation that focuses on relational dynamics. Together with pastor Tep Samnang, I submit this for your prayerful consideration, believing that this manner of contextualisation may be helpful for doing mission in Asian contexts. **IJFM**

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