

Attaining Manhood Survey (March 2014) – Analysis

In this survey we sought to discover what young men on the threshold of manhood understood about making a successful transition from boyhood to manhood. We wanted to understand how intentionally this is done and what processes, rites of passage or other helps were in customary use during this critical period in young male lives

We gave the survey to **high school pupils** who might be seen as “boys” and to **university students** who might be seen either as “in transition” or as having entered in to manhood. We have analysed the responses separately to gain a picture of what boys anticipated would happen and what young men were actually experiencing

- a) The great majority of answers (85%) indicated they were not aware of any traditional or current rites of passage, ceremonies, events or activities that either prepared them for manhood or celebrated their transition.
A few saw being a monk (typically this is for 1 month to 1 year) as the period of transition. Others said it was a time to be thoughtful and purposeful about the future. Some linked this to leaving parents and having to work hard and learn perseverance. There was a mention of birthdays which may be a modern borrowing from western culture.
- b) The responses to a question about the emotional health and maturity of adult men showed a perception that many Khmer men:
 - are dependent on parents because they still live with them,
 - do not take responsibility for their own lives or the lives of their families,
 - are not able or willing to make decisions,
 - are immature, selfish, thoughtless and behave immorally, examples given of this were; playing games, chasing girls, drinking beer and generally undervaluing women and relating to them badly
- c) We asked for examples of culturally acceptable ways to become a man - responses were a mixture of;
 - i) **undertaking actions** that change boys into men e.g.; being a monk, getting a job, getting one’s own car and
 - ii) **adopting “adult” behaviours** as ways of transitioning to manhood e.g.; becoming strong and muscled, drinking beer, smoking, flirting and having sex with different girls.
 - iii) **actions or characteristics** (positive and negative) which indicated one was now a man e.g.; patience, loyalty to parents, bravery, responsibility, not being violent towards women, **but** also using strength to intimidate the weak, avoiding household chores. Interestingly these didn’t always relate to i) and ii);

There seemed to be a sense of what a good man should be but there was no clear idea of how to achieve it – a combination of taking on **responsibility** but also copying observed adult behaviour which is often seen as **irresponsible** and corresponds to the generally negative view expressed (in section b) of the adult men they knew.

When asked whether these ways of becoming a man were helpful there was a near 50 -50 split between helpful/unhelpful

- d) When asked whether Khmer culture taught young men to handle power/responsibility, 29% had no view (abstained), 42% said it didn't and others commented that men needed power because they perceived that they had to work harder than women and also they had to protect themselves.
- e) The final question (i.e. after respondents had time to think through the earlier questions) enquired about their happiness with the state of Khmer males today. 70% were not happy, 15% abstained, and only 15% were happy.

Conclusion

Among young males transiting to manhood there is:

- a) an awareness of positive and negative traits in adults, but not necessarily any moral basis for evaluating them (although the morality of some men was questioned.)
- b) a generally poor view of the attitudes and behaviour of adult males they observe
- c) no knowledge of any formal, or adequate way of preparing them for adulthood and its responsibilities, either in traditional or contemporary practice
- d) no awareness of how they could intentionally prepare themselves.

Significantly, no-one mentioned help given by fathers or other senior males in their families.

There appears to be a vacuum regarding the preparation of Khmer boys for manhood. Boys have no awareness of society or family providing mentoring or guidance because, it appears, there is very little available from these sources.

There is therefore a "gap in the market" for churches, youth movements, youth focused NGOs to develop some kind of curriculum which facilitates self-discovery and coming to terms with problems experienced in childhood and utilises useful knowledge, practical experiences and supportive relationships to enable young males to understand and be prepared for the challenges ahead. This would also introduce and reinforce positive attitudes to the moral issues raised by the respondents such as; casual sex, relating to women in general and partners in particular, responsibility for families, physical imposition of power, domestic violence, decision making including partners, drink/substance abuse etc.

Boroh la-or Pit intends to explore the feasibility of creating such a curriculum involving partner organisations/individuals with any expertise in this area.

Appendix 1 – the Survey

Becoming Men - A Survey

Many traditional cultures had ways/rituals to initiate young males into manhood. Often the elders of a village would arrange for a group of 13 to 15 year olds to go through a rite of initiation which always made these young men experience some kind of physical and/or emotional pain. This was usually done away from their familiar environment – away from their family and village. When they finished their initiation they were changed and they behaved differently within their community. What did they learn?

- a) They were very unimportant compared to the universe but important and valued in their tribe/village
- b) That life was not selfishly about them as an individual, but about contributing to their community.
- c) That they were really not able to control much.
- d) Life is hard
- e) They should not try to make others do what they wanted.
- f) How to use their power properly when relating to others.

Questions

1. Describe any positive ways in Cambodia (past or present) that you know of where the elders, parents or relatives used some kind of initiation to move older boys into manhood.
2. Do you know of any ritual for boys (13-15) that helps them to start the journey of becoming a man?
3. Many countries no longer have any ritual or activity to help young men become healthy adult men. Joining the armed forces may help with this but that only seems to develop the warrior part of men. Are there ways in which Cambodian men do not become healthy adults? What are they?
4. What does the typical Cambodian man think he has to do to become a real man? Describe ways you have heard people say makes someone a man.
5. Do these ways really help boys to become good men within their families and society? If they do not help, please explain the ways they cause damage?
6. In this culture, how are young men taught to use their power as an adult? What is the result of this?
7. How are young men taught to deal with emotional pain, disappointment, and things going wrong? What is the result of this?
8. Give your description of what a real 'man' is according to your own ideas.
9. In what ways are you a real man according to your own ideas?
10. Are you happy with the way Cambodian men behave now? Why or why not?
11. What things would you change about Cambodian men and how would you do it?
12. How should men show their own sons how to become a man?