

**Refugee Review Tribunal  
AUSTRALIA**

**RRT RESEARCH RESPONSE**

**Research Response Number:** KHM30571  
**Country:** Khmer  
**Date:** 7 September 2006

Keywords: Cambodia – Khmers – Wedding practices – Ceremonies

This response was prepared by the Country Research Section of the Refugee Review Tribunal (RRT) after researching publicly accessible information currently available to the RRT within time constraints. This response is not, and does not purport to be, conclusive as to the merit of any particular claim to refugee status or asylum.

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**Questions**

- 1. Please provide information on current Khmer weddings in villages. Is it normal to have a wedding outside the family home somewhere on the outskirts of the village?**
- 2. How large are weddings generally?**
- 3. How many tables of guests would be normal?**
- 4. Please provide information about the exchange of rings.**
- 5. Please provide information about the ceremony, etc.**

**RESPONSE**

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While the “normal” Khmer wedding practices are in a state of flux as the country is exposed to the stronger influence from the West, it appears that the traditional wedding ceremony is held in the bride’s family home with a small number of close relatives and friends. However, parts of the celebration, feast and photo taking are undertaken outside in a park or opening nearby. The size of weddings also varies depending on the factors such as wealth and social status of the families of the couple, although guests are normally large in number. Further, many weddings are nowadays held both in a traditional and a Western style.

A most typical full traditional Khmer wedding is described by May Titthara in his article ‘Traditional Khmer Wedding’. It states that:

A Khmer man cannot simply take a wife without going through the proper customary procedures. Traditionally, one has to go through four rituals to claim a wife. First, Pithy Chechouv requires the help of a respectable woman, a matchmaker of sort (usually an elderly person) who would go to make the first ‘inquiry’ (to seek information)

from the mother of the girl in question. Provided that she gets an affirmative response, the matchmaker would inquire for the birth details of the girl – usually the time, day, month and year of birth is required. This information, together with the man's birth details, is then handed over to an Achar (a priest) who will see if indeed the couple's birth details are compatible. If so, the man's family would then send a Chhmay (Mediator) to make a formal proposal. This procedure is known as Pithy Sdei Dundoeung. This may sometimes require more than one visit and each time the mediator will call upon the girl's family with some small gifts to establish a good relationship. If all goes well and the girl's family accepts the marriage proposal, then the families would fix a date to perform the Pithy Si Slar Bangchoap Peak.

The Si Slar Bangchoap Peak is a betel chewing ritual performed as testimony to the agreement of marriage. This ceremony has to be well arranged. Friends and relatives of the both parties are invited to witness the occasion and it is customary for the groom's side to bring fruits and other forms of gifts in pairs to the bride's house. Normally by this time, the groom's family would have already established and agreed with the bride's family on the amount of dowry necessary and bring it along to the ceremony at the bride's house. Here the parents from both sides would ceremoniously chew and exchange betel leaves to seal their agreement to the marriage. During the ritual, the parents ask the groom to thank and serve the mediator and all the people who are there assist. The families then would decide on an auspicious date for the wedding ceremony.

### **Wedding Ceremony-Day 1**

#### The morning session:

A mediator formally requests a meeting with the parents to ask for their authorization to build the wedding hall -- known officially as "the hall of the areca flower". He asks for a meadow for buffaloes to graze; a forest to provide firewood and a pond to draw water from. Everything can be done only with the authorization of the parents.

#### Afternoon session:

The mediator and an Achar (a priest) ask for a meeting with the parents to request permission to prepare the rituals for entering the wedding hall including the beating of the gong and of the big drum to play music; dance and sing according to tradition. When the parents agree, they mention a chosen time and obey accordingly. Then they ask for permission to discuss the programs for the second and third day.

### **Wedding Ceremony-Day 2**

#### Morning session:

**At 5.00a.m** the Achar prepares a ritual to pray to the "Krong Pealie", the Deity who takes care of the earth, to seek recognition for the groom to be accepted as a newcomer (family member) and offers best wishes and good luck.

**At 7.00a.m** A woman mediator goes and meets the parents to customarily perform one more ritual of a formal marriage proposal;

Two trust worthy ladies are assigned to look at the presents (dowry, etc..) to see if they are according to the parent's wishes and they are given priority to decide on the wedding.

The two ladies inspect the presents and report back to the parents. If the presents are in order, the ritual of the procession to the bride's house takes place. This ritual is a representation of the determination to formalize the wedding. Then it is the time for offering "thang rorng" (square betel container used in the wedding ceremony) which symbolizes the betel chewing. Following which, they perform the ritual of offering food to the spirits of the ancestors to inform the ancestors of the date of the wedding and to seek their blessings.

#### Afternoon session:

**At about 1 or 2 pm**, it is the time for the groom's procession to the areca-palm tree. This is the ritual of areca flower cutting, accompanied by the wedding music.

Once the areca flowers are gathered, the groom's procession returns to the wedding hall -- "the hall of the areca flower"

## Preparation of hair-cutting ritual

According to the Venerable Ly Sovy of the Langkar Pagoda in Phnom Penh, “Most parents nowadays allow the groom to do all customary rituals at the bride’s house to save time, but they have still to respect the Khmer traditional proceedings.”

In the ritual of the “hair-cutting”, Achar Ly Sovy further explained, “The parents allow the groom to sit side by side with the bride, but do not permit him to sit on her right hand side, but he is allowed to sit on her left side and they should avoid touching each other and the ritual of the hair-cutting signifies the cleaning of the body generally since people in the past sport longer hair and appear untidy. Nowadays, the hair-cutting ritual is only symbolic and not true. Besides only their own family member can perform the symbolic ritual of the haircut, because they are afraid someone else might murder the groom.” “If the rituals are related to happiness and prosperity from the gods such as offering food to the Krong Pealie, (Deity who takes care of the earth) and the hair-cutting, the parents authorize the salutation to face eastwards, but if it is

related to monks, deceased ancestors or a living ancestor such as asking for the monks’ blessing and food offering to the ancestor spirits.....etc, they must face south,” Venerable Ly Sovy explained.

Evening session:

### The ritual of “the monks’ blessing”.

This “monks’ blessing” ritual is carried out first for the bride and then for the groom. The ritual of the “monks blessing” is when the parents allow the bride to sit in the middle section of the house, facing south, The groom is located at the side, but a little behind the bride’s seat, facing in the same direction. The ritual of “food offering to the ancestor spirit”, Presently, this ritual only takes place in the western parts of Takeo and Kampot provinces. Most parents still prefer to have these same ancient rituals. But in some other place in former times, parents allowed the bride to sit in the middle section, called Laveng Chan facing the south. When the ritual is finished for the bride, the groom is authorized to do the ritual in the side, called Laveng Chhieng, facing the same direction.

At midnight:

The parents order the preparation of the ritual of “teeth staining” following after an ancient belief that a righteous woman should have stained teeth. The bride is made to chew Leak, a natural substance that produces a harmless dye that stains her teeth. This ritual is prepared only for the bride in order to grant righteousness and to wish her happiness. From hence, when she talks to people, her smooth voice makes her more charming and everyone likes her and there is no quarrelling with anybody. Also, the intention is to bring their daughter a greater understanding about life and its issues when she will also be living with others.

The ritual of “teeth staining” also includes several other different small rituals.

### Final Ceremony -Day3

The ritual of the married couple’s greeting (Sampeah Phtum). This greeting ritual is a procession of the groom to the bride’s house. The couples go to the bride’s house to pray to deceased ancestors. They also both show their respect to the living grandparents and receive their blessings for a happy and joyful life. This ritual includes several different small rituals as well.

“Three days after the wedding, the new couple must go to the pagoda to receive blessings from the monks,” concluded the elderly Achar Sovy

(Titthara, May 2002, ‘Traditional Cambodian Wedding’, *Leisure Cambodia*, Vol 2, No. 10, Leisure Cambodia website

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Another report by Doreen Cheng describes a traditional Cambodian wedding somewhat diluted as follows:

Cambodian weddings traditionally consisted of ceremonies and celebrations lasting three days and three nights. Three is considered to be an especially auspicious number by Cambodians

because of its association with the “three jewels” of Buddhism: the Buddha, the Sangha (brotherhood of monks), and the Dhamma (the Buddha’s teachings).

The first day is set aside for blessings from the priest for the couple and their family. In Sokhin’s and Rel’s case, the Buddhist ceremony was held in the temple. As it is a rather private and religious ceremony, the only guests present during this ceremony are close relatives.

During the wedding ceremony proper, the bride goes through 10 dress changes and takes time off to pose for photographs. The wedding began early in the morning with the bridegroom, dressed in traditional Cambodian costume, arriving at the bride’s house. Along the way to the bride’s house, the groom’s procession will be banging pots and chanting, this noisy group sidesteps sleeping dogs and cyclo drivers, while serenading the backstreet population of Phnom Penh. Smiling people watch from balconies. Some send down a shower of flower petals. Flanked by two best men, the bridegroom waited at the entrance where banana trees were tied to the pillars.

To the chimes of a gong, the girl and her family approached the visitors, greeted them by cupping their palms, following which the bride and bridegroom garlanded each other. The couple walked into the house carrying a silver container containing flowers from the areca nut tree and other offerings. Young girls threw jasmine flowers along their path.

They knelt down and paid their respects to the bride’s parents before offering prayers at a brightly decorated altar. Soon members of the bridegroom’s family trooped in, carrying gifts on silver trays.

In Cambodian tradition, the number of gifts was an indication of the wealth of the bridegroom. Sokhin’s family brought in 60 trays containing numerous items including several types of fruit, biscuits, cakes, sweets, soft drinks, beer, meat, vegetable and household items.

Some bridegrooms have been known to bring as many as 200 trays of gifts while those in the lower-income group are satisfied with about 10. These gifts and jewellery have replaced money as dowry. The bridegroom usually pays the dowry.

The trays of gifts are neatly arranged to fill the hall of the house when the master of ceremonies, a singer-cum-jester, begins to croon a song while his woman companion dances in a slow rhythmic manner to a traditional tune played by the band in attendance. Three traditional songs accompany the presentation of dowry:

Neay Pream He Kaun Kamlas (Arrival of the Groom) · A song telling the story of the groom and his family’s journey to the bride’s house bearing meats, fruits, pastries, drinks and desserts of every variety to be presented on the wedding day.

Chambak Roy (Presenting the Dowry) · A dialogue between the matchmakers, parents, relatives, and friends of the bride and groom in which the groom’s family and friends officially present the dowry gifts to the bride’s family.

Pak Paeuk Pisa Sla (Inviting the Elders to Chew Betel Nut) · Presentation of the betel nut to the bride and groom’s elders. In turn, parents of both the bride and groom ask for blessings and well-wishes for their children.

The woman then collects samples of the gifts and places them on a tray as the singer, through his song, describes the gifts and asks the bride’s family whether they are satisfied or is it necessary to pick up more.

Amidst the laughter the bride’s parents nod their heads in approval while displaying a wide grin. This is followed by breakfast of porridge, fruit and sweets while the master of ceremony and companion keep the audience entertained with folk songs. Here, the bride and bridegroom will usually feed each other, with the guests looking on. Only when they have finish their

breakfast will the guests begin eating. Among Cambodians of Chinese descent, the tea ceremony will be held before breakfast for the guests.

Breakfast is followed by the hair-cutting ceremony which is a must at all weddings. It is a traditional rite handed down from the old days to add merriment to the wedding. Although in the old days the hair-cutting was for real, nowadays a mock hair cut is staged. The couple, having changed into traditional outfits of gold and yellow, are seated on decorated chairs. The master of ceremony and his companion then teases them and the family members much to the delight of those present. Carrying a tray with scissors, a comb and a bottle of hair spray, the first person given the honor to cut their hair is family matriach, Leum Sok, who pretended to cut the hair of the bridegroom. Soon she retrieved a gold ring from the hair which had earlier been placed there by the priest. She did the same to the bride after which the expensive hair spray was used.

This ritual is repeated by other elderly folk at the ceremony. Retrieving the gold or silver rings is to signify that the couple will have a prosperous life.

The solemnisation of the wedding then follows. The bridegroom, after another change of clothes -- this time dressed like royalty, approaches the entrance of the house where the bride, in a dazzling red outfit with gold embroidery, awaits him.

The washing of the feet ceremony is held where in the old days the bride placed the groom's feet on a tray and washed them. These days, however, she merely sprays cologne over the feet. The priest holds their hands together and chants. And after blessings from the parents, the couple put their hands on a pillow and a sword is placed across their closed palms.

The parents then tie red thread around the left hand of the couple and sprinkle scented water on their hands to solemnise the wedding. This ritual is repeated by others present.

Close relatives give rings or chains apart from the usual words of advice and well-wishes of happiness, good health, success, prosperity, and long-lasting love to the couple. The praises are acknowledged and witnessed by the loud sound of the gong and joyful cheer. The priest then lights three candles which are circulated among married couples seated close to the couple. They wave their hands around the flame and pass the candle on to the next person.

The candles go around seven times since seven is an auspicious number. The priest sprinkles flowers on the couple and others follow suit to bless the couple. Four songs accompany this ceremony:

Phat Cheay -- A melody inviting the bride, accompanied by her bridesmaids, to the pairing ceremony. A distinguished female relative leads the bride into the room.

Kang Saeuy -- A melody accompanying the offering of gifts to the ancestor spirits and asking for their blessings.

Bangvel Po Pil (Seven Rotations) Married guests sit around the bride and groom as the sacred flame is rotated seven times around the new couple. The smoke of the flame, however, is sacred enough to protect them from all evils if they are sincerely committed to each other. Family members who receive the candle motion their hands over the flame to guide the smoke of the sacred flame over the bride and groom.

Bay Khon Chang Dai (Tying the Wrists) -- While the bride and groom's wrists are tied with the blessing strings, the following song is sung: "We tie, we tie three strings to each wrist of our children. We wish for true happiness and success to this couple, who will always be together like wet grass seeds. We tie your left wrist to make you remember your parents. We tie your right wrist to make you carry on the family lineage and traditions."

The colourful wedding ends with a sumptuous dinner later at night with more songs and dances to entertain everyone.

After the wedding, the couple and their entourage also go to nearby parks or the palace rounds on the third day. Here, the newly wedded couple walk around in their finest clothes while the video camera rolls and the cameras click away (Cheng, Doreen 2002, 'A Cambodian Wedding...', Thingsasian website, 11 January (11/1/02)

[http://www.thingsasian.com/goto\\_article/article.1859.html](http://www.thingsasian.com/goto_article/article.1859.html) – Accessed 5 September 2006 – Attachment 2).

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Another version of the Khmer wedding is given in a report by Connie Groshc (Groshc, Connie 2005, 'A Wedding', *The Providence Journal*, 17 April – Attachment 4).

While recognizing that the old ways remain at least in part, Keo Mony comments on the changes to the wedding practices as follows:

In the old days, the marriage was an arduous and lengthy affair. It could take months to prepare for the marriage. Courtship involved many rituals to be followed and wedding ceremonies lasted three days. Today, because of the demands of modern living and the influence of other cultures, marriage is much simpler and less time consuming. Courtship and wedding ceremonies can be conducted in one day.

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In Cambodia a man pays dowry to the parents of the girl he marries. He also pays for all expenses of the wedding ceremonies. Girls' families may demand huge dowries as a demonstration that the man will be able to care for his wife. Usually parents would not marry their daughter without dowry as it would be considered a dishonor...

The wedding ceremonies are traditionally held at the bride's home...

Today, the state of marriage, like pretty much everything else in Cambodia, has declined considerably (Mony, Keo 2004, 'Marriage', University of Washington, Ethnomed website, September

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#### **PRESENTATION OF DOWRY**

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Distinguishing between the ceremony and the celebration in a wedding, a 2002 report 'Heang Samath-Bou Chida Wedding' also states that:

The actual wedding ceremony took place about 6:30 AM at the bride's house with only the family and a few friends present. But starting at 2:00 PM, the whole village and other family and friends are invited to a meal served outdoors under tents...Preparing food for 500 to 1000 people a major task...('Heang Samath-Bou Chida Wedding' 2002, Parish without border website, 24 February <http://www.parish-without-borders.net/cditt/deaf/samath%20wedding/samathwedding.htm> – Accessed 31 August 2006 – Attachment 7; See also 'A Cambodia Wedding' 2004, Parish without border website, 25 April <http://www.parish-without-borders.net/cditt/cambodia/culture/2004/wedding/pages/page-2.html> – Accessed 1 September 2006 and <http://www.parish-without-borders.net/cditt/cambodia/culture/2004/wedding/pages/page-3.html> – Accessed 1 September 2006 – Attachment 8).

Similarly, Phillip Bennoun and others comment in a report 'Religion in Kampuchea' that:

In the ceremony, the Buddhist monks play a role in prayers and associated ritual, but the principal person in the wedding ceremony is the Achar (see Religion and moral philosophy: Kampuchea). In most of the major cities and larger towns, the actual festivity is usually a banquet in a restaurant, following a traditional ceremony at home (Bennoun, Phillip et al 1984, 'Religion in Kampuchea' – Attachment 9).

A well publicised conventional wedding of two women in 1995 was attended by more than 250 friends, relatives and the just plain curious. It was held in a village of Kro Bao Ach Kok about 14km from Phnom Penh ('Husband and wife with no male hassles' 1995, *Phnom Penh Post*, 24 March – 6 April – Attachment 10).

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RRT Library Catalogue

## **List of Attachments**

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