

Field Research in Cambodia: Aims and background

The project is built on one proposition: that people in a country post-conflict bear valuable cultural resources; that these resources are threatened by post-conflict transition and interventions; that the traditional healers are key harbingers and bearers of these cultural systems for healing; and that the culture, given the opportunity for revitalisation, can help in the process of healing, moving forward and development. A culturally competent health system, in responding to the needs of people in a post-conflict setting, *will* harness this cultural capital and, in so doing, respect the United Nations Declaration for Cultural Diversity. The ultimate beneficiary is the community. This project, in exploring this proposition, **aims** to create a framework for the use of a cultural diversity programming lens for cultural competence in post-conflict work in a range of country settings. The project's **objectives** are:

- Document the cultural transformations of Cambodian traditional healing practices (the intangible culture) under the influence of post-conflict forces;
- Explore the consequences of cultural erosion upon the 'cultural capital' of Cambodian family and community life;
- Explore the potential to revitalise the cultural capital, and to enhance cultural competence of public health systems;
- Create a library of the intangible culture of Cambodian traditional healing systems which can be used by the Cambodian people and the international community for planning services and improving health outcomes as well as an historic archive.

Objective 1

Documenting cultural transformations of Cambodian family and healing practices under influence of post-conflict forces

The research will investigate the ways in which traditional culture has been maintained, lost, revived and transformed by the social consequences of civil conflict. **Changes are due to acculturation and globalisation.** Culture is not static. Cambodian women, having relied traditionally on family elders for advice, might turn to child health providers, who know little of their childrearing ways or of the changes in the face of acculturation. What is the impact on the parental capacity to deliver cultural capital to the young? It is important to document how partially-aculturated parents and their children walk the intercultural tightrope. The project will elaborate upon how people might draw upon their cultural capital as a resource, interactively use it as an anchor in their changing socio-cultural environment, or relinquish it – and what are the consequences for their future. Questions of interest concern the extent to which Cambodia's conflict and current social violence have themselves been reflections of the strains placed on traditional culture by international influence (including foreign aid) and globalization, and how the pressures of globalization resemble or differ from both colonial/postcolonial development. **Indicators** are cultural capital; new dispute settlement and risk patterns; and new issues such as HIV/AIDS and domestic violence. The **outcome** is an assessment tool for cultural mapping in post-conflict settings.

Objective 2

Explore consequences of erosion of ‘cultural capital’ of Cambodian family life

The project will examine the impact of the loss of traditional culture upon family and community life. Attention will be paid to the emergence of new forms of violent behaviour not in keeping with cultural tradition, and to the socialization of young people into this new post-conflict culture. We will examine the state capacity to control the unravelling of society, the impact of regime type, and subsequent growing dependence on international organisations on social, cultural and spiritual connectedness. **Indicators** are cultural bereavement; destructive behaviour to self and family; cultural constructions of new idioms of disharmony and violence; transformation of traditional idioms of distress; and politicisation of domestic and neighbourhood troubles.

Objective 3

Explore potential to revitalise cultural capital & enhance cultural competence

The project will pave the way for cultural competence in post conflict community rehabilitation programs in settings such as Cambodia. While the focus of many rehabilitation programs is to buttress central authority against social disorder and violence, the proposition of this project is that healers, as cultural authorities and key interpreters of local culture with a particular ‘insider’ view into post-conflict suffering, are interpreters and mediators of social conflict and violence; and articulate and contest the competing meanings given to violence at individual and community levels and thereby alleviate pain and enable them to restore moral order. The research will examine ways in which healers categorise the misfortunes of individuals and the state (taxonomy) and explain the suffering of people and the nation (aetiology and eschatology) in ways which make sense to their communities. It is proposed that the healers may be crucial links between local moral rehabilitation and the resources and protection offered by the state in the face of social violence and globalisation. A caveat to be tested is whether and how the healers have moved on given the changes in post conflict globalising Cambodian society, and to what extent their views and methods are of relevance. The Buddhist Institute in Phnom Penh is considering some hard questions relevant to the role that healers and monks may play in repairing social fabric: Are monks being effectively trained for outreach work? If cultural traditions are linked, albeit perversely, with the Khmer Rouge, would attempts to restore links to them be successful? How are monks making themselves relevant to youth in the Old and New Worlds? In what ways are they outmoded or even dangerous, a valuable but neglected resource, or a valorised asset for community rehabilitation? But how might such healers, when utilized by NGOs, become further transformed as agents for globalization, or as voices for a synergy between the two worlds?

We will discover the extent to which the traditional sector is used in (a) understanding local models of distress, (b) strategies for problem solving and conflict resolution, and (c) the design and implementation of processes to build the social conditions for peace, especially in relation to psychosocial support. We will consider ways in which local and international NGOs may have further compromised local healing mechanisms and capacity for self-recovery, or provided alternative methods to build the social conditions for peace. Are there consequences in the upsurge of family violence and the socialisation of children into violence, and how could elements of culture assist as an antidote to the increasing violence among

Cambodian families? **Indicators** are revitalisation of elements of cultural capital such as traditional healing rituals; local conceptions of power including the effects on men and women; and examples such as HIVAIDS in which culture may help to break the risk-transmission cycle. The **outcome** is guidelines for an intervention that harnesses the cultural capital for cultural survival and enhanced life chances.

Objective 4

Create a library of Cambodian traditional healing systems

There is an urgent need to create a library of traditional healing. Health policy makers, in recognition of the contrasting frameworks of Western science and indigenous knowledge systems are calling for culturally relevant frameworks and processes for knowledge generation and knowledge transfer. This project offers them a cultural lens which can help them understand how culture affects the health of individuals and populations – and is affected by it. **International humanitarian and development** funding organisations such as USAID and AusAID, and NGOs have also become concerned about the effects of culture, for example, on cross-cultural briefing-debriefing of expatriate workers, the impact of programs on country nationals, and the effects of culture on critical incidents facing aid workers and recipients of donor programs.

With NGOs in Cambodia sometimes struggling to make their programs more culturally competent, commissioning endless needs assessments of local health beliefs, there is a need for a reference work to avoid reinventing the wheel. The **indicator** is the ethnographic database of traditional healing systems. The **outcome** is an international reference standard suitable for aid and development.

Significance and Innovation

The **significance** is that the project creates:

(1) a **cultural lens** for health and human service policy makers, educators and international NGOs and UN organisations, which they have flagged as a priority in a globalised world;

(2) a **database** and preserve Indigenous Knowledge (IK); demonstrate how to use cultural maps for health programming and to community regeneration and revitalization; and highlight aspects of intangible culture useful for health development and worthy of preservation;

(3) a **framework for cultural competence** in building the social foundations of peace in post-conflict societies; inform best practice of international organisations and guide workers in the responsible use of traditional healers; guide the analysis, using culturally normed indicators, of the needs and rights of the target population and the underlying causes of their conditions of social injustice; add to the capacity of organisations for rapid anthropological assessment of local understandings of conflict and health;

(4) insights that can be **applied to other international settings**, with the lessons from the Cambodia project in due course can be tested elsewhere.