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Ideological Inequalities: Khmer Culture and Widows' Perception of Remarriage

Susan Hagood Lee¹

Abstract

To explain the enduring persistence of gender inequality, structural explanations alone are not sufficient. One must look at the realm of cultural ideas to understand the entrenched nature of female subordination. Ideological inequalities embedded in cultural beliefs and practices sustain and perpetuate structural inequalities. This article explores ideological inequalities in Cambodian culture as an explanation for the reluctance of rural widows to remarry, despite the economic benefits that a new husband would likely bring. Using concepts from the theory of the social construction of reality, two cultural sources for widows' reluctance are considered, the beliefs and practices of Khmer Buddhism and the *chbab srey*, an influential moral code for women. The article theorizes that widows shy away from remarriage because Khmer religious and social customs place women into an ideologically subordinate position in the household. Widows fear that in a new marriage, they would lose control over their household and their children's lives. By remaining widows, they have cultural space to reject female subordination, maintain control of their household, and focus on their role as mothers to earn religious merit for their next life. Instead of ideological inequalities that subordinate women, modified cultural arrangements can create ideological equalities that nurture both men and women.

Keywords: Ideology, Widows, Buddhism, Cambodia, Participant Observation

Introduction

To explain the enduring persistence of gender inequality, structural explanations alone are not sufficient. While economic and political inequalities play a significant role in the lives of women and girls, one must look at the realm of cultural ideas to understand the entrenched nature of female subordination. Cultural ideas are complex, dense, and powerful. They undergird gender relationships, perpetuate them into the future, and resist change. Such a complex of ideas supporting a power structure can be rightly viewed as an ideology. Ideological inequalities embedded in cultural beliefs and practices sustain and perpetuate structural inequalities. Ideological assumptions and beliefs are not as visible or as easily measured as numbers of women in political office, wage gaps, or high school completion rates. Yet they are critical components of societal expectations for women and girls and influence their lives in pervasive and often subconscious ways.

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Ideas and Ideologies

Marx (1978) first raised the importance of ideas in maintaining systems of domination in his treatise *The German Ideology*, observing famously, “The ideas of the ruling class are in every epoch the ruling ideas” (p. 172). Marx saw ideologies as the means to reproduce social inequalities across generations in a circular fashion. Ideas about appropriate class relationships legitimate stratified social structures that then perpetuate ideas of domination and subordination.

Feminist sociologists have focused on ideologies in similar fashion as key to maintaining systems of social domination. As Lengermann and Niebrugge (1996) note, “Ideology is an intricate web of beliefs about reality and social life that is institutionalized as public knowledge and disseminated through society so effectively that it becomes taken-for-granted ... ideological control is *the* basic process in domination” (p. 340). Ideologies describing gender relationships legitimate unequal gender hierarchies. Lorber (1994) defines gender ideology as “the justification of gender statuses, particularly their differential evaluation” (p. 30). The ideology of male domination has staying power because it “tends to suppress criticism by making these evaluations seem natural” (Lorber, p. 30).

The power of ideologies on the perspectives and behavior of individuals can be understood broadly with concepts from Berger and Luckmann’s (1966) theory of the social construction of reality (Berger, 1990). Human beings construct their social reality in a dialectical process in which a creative individual originates ideas and practices that become seemingly real, external objects over time. Individuals in turn internalize the ideas and practices into their subjective consciousness where they form their social identity (Wallace, 1998). In this dialectical cycle, Berger notes, humans create society and society in turn creates human beings (Berger, 1990). The social world created through this process—the *nomos*—has great power because individuals see it as a durable reality with “external, subjectively opaque and coercive facticity” (Berger, 1990, p. 11).

When initiated by a revered religious figure, the dialectical process gains even more power. Ideas first expressed by a religious innovator are externalized in religious doctrines and institutions that become sacred ideological objects, no longer subject to human revision, defying rational scrutiny or challenge. Gender ideas linked to religion have particular weight (Keyes, 1984). Religious beliefs about the value of men and women, for instance, become incorporated into individual men’s and women’s sense of place in the world and their proper relationship with one another. Men and women learn gender ideals through rituals such as religious instruction, ordination, and role models of religious officials. Religiously infused gender ideologies shape cultural practices, reinforce social institutions, and are internalized by men, women, and children, profoundly influencing their personal and household decisions.

Khmer Widows’ Marriage Decisions

This article explores ideological inequalities in Cambodian society as a plausible explanation for the surprising reluctance of rural widows to remarry (Green, 1999; Lee, 2006; Owen, 1996). A disproportionate number of women in Cambodia have been widowed. Under the Khmer Rouge regime from 1975-1979, some 2.2 million people died (Etcheson, 2005), leaving behind many widowed survivors, mostly women. Even today, Cambodia’s sex ratio is highly skewed in the older population with fewer than 65 males to every 100 females over 54 years old (Central Intelligence Agency, 2017).

In developing countries such as Cambodia, rural widows are among the poorest residents. Bereft of their life partner and coworker, they struggle to support themselves and their children. They earn their living in the midst of cultural expectations that define the limits of acceptable behavior for widows. Widows may rely on extended family for economic support, falling back on their natal family or remaining with their marital relatives for the sake of their children's inheritance (Chen, 2000). In some cases, widows have the option of remarrying. Some cultures require widows to remarry prescribed relatives while others prohibit widow remarriage completely (Owen, 1996).

Cambodian culture allows widows to remarry at their discretion and at first glance, remarriage appears beneficial for widows in poor rural circumstances. Remarriage would bring an able male worker into the household to assist with agricultural tasks. Yet even in the face of economic necessity, many rural widows, even young ones, do not want to remarry (Green, 1999; Lee, 2006; Owen, 1996). The economic consequences are significant. Widows' children have less food on average and are at greater risk for malnutrition, especially during the hunger gap before the new harvest. Less money is available for children's school fees, and children are likely to have little schooling. Illiterate adults are less able to support an aged mother. When a medical crisis erupts, poor widows are more likely to deplete their meager savings or lose economic assets such as land. In short, they are among the most vulnerable, and often the poorest of the poor.

The reluctance of Cambodian widows to remarry is all the more surprising since women in southeast Asia are relatively high in status compared to women in nearby India or China (Karim, 1995; Kusakabe, 2001; Schröter, 2013; P. Van Esterik, 1982a; Winzeler 1982). Southeast Asian women work outside their homes and manage the household funds. They predominate in village markets and are skillful at negotiating the best price. Historically, women made up half the traders in many Southeast Asian countries (Boserup, 1970, p. 89) and still dominate the informal marketplace (Derks, 2005; International Labor Organization and Asian Development Bank, 2011; Kusakabe, 2001). Far from being threatened by wives who make money, husbands welcome their economic enterprises. Yet even in these distinctive conditions of "relative sexual equality" (Winzeler, 1982, p. 211), many rural Cambodian widows decline to remarry.

To explain rural Cambodian widows' reluctance to remarry, this article looks at two cultural sources, the beliefs of Khmer Buddhism and the *chbab srey*, an influential moral code. As Penny Van Esterik (1982a) noted, "There is little to be gained from examining women's roles in economic production without also considering their ideological definition according to the dominant religious tradition, or their place in the household" (p. 2). If economic self-interest cannot explain the reluctance of Cambodian rural widows to remarry, perhaps the ideological position assigned to them by Khmer Buddhism and the *chbab srey* can shed light on their behavior. The argument of this article is that widows do not remarry because Khmer religious and social practices place women into an ideologically subordinate position in the household. These ideological inequalities are embedded in the Khmer *nomos* (Berger, 1990), the meaningful social order, and resist direct challenge. To sidestep ideological subordination, widows remain on their own despite economic hardship. In the Khmer Buddhist outlook, widows have cultural space to reject marriage, maintain control of their household, and focus on their role as mothers to earn religious merit for their next life.

Methods

This study originated in an effort to explain the reluctance of rural Cambodian widows to remarry, a finding of a previous research project (Lee, 2006). In searching for an explanation, the author was alerted to the importance of Khmer Buddhism and the *chbab srey* in subsequent studies (Lee, 2008; Lee, 2013). One study (Lee, 2008) interviewed *daun-chi*,² female lay devotees, about their practice of Buddhism and their position in the Buddhist temple organization. It was clear from these interviews that *daun-chi* practice an intense spiritual life, comparable to that of Cambodian Buddhist monks. For instance, the interviewees' daily schedule included listening to two sermons, spending three hours in prayer, and meditating for a half-hour or more (Lee, 2008). The *daun-chi* remained at the temple the entire day with the exception of a few women who shopped for food in the morning (Lee, 2008). In addition to an arduous spiritual routine, *daun-chi* dress in distinctive garments and shave their heads as monks do. However, despite the intensity of their spiritual life, *daun-chi* are not considered true nuns and hold a much lower status than monks in Cambodian Buddhist life. The author's interviews with the *daun-chi* raised the question of why they were seen as inferior to monks and led the author to consider the substance of Buddhist teaching as an explanation.

The author's interviews with *daun-chi* were augmented by many years of participant-observation in Buddhist ceremonies in Fall River, Massachusetts. The author was first exposed to Khmer Buddhism when a group of Cambodian refugees held Buddhist services in the gymnasium of her church. Later, the Cambodian community established its own temple and the author attended ceremonies on special holiday occasions. The author further experienced Khmer Buddhism while doing field research in Cambodia (Lee, 2006). She visited many Buddhist temples and observed a variety of religious ceremonies. It was clear from these experiences that Buddhism plays a very large role in forming the beliefs and practices of Cambodian society. In searching for an explanation for widows' reluctance to remarry, the author decided that an investigation of Khmer Buddhism might be a fruitful avenue.

The importance of the *chbab srey* was brought home to the author in interviews with Cambodian women in Wisconsin (Lee, 2013). In that study, women expressed an intense interest and knowledge of the *chbab srey*. Many of the interviewees had learned the *chbab srey* by heart as schoolgirls and could still chant its most famous verses. They had often applied the lessons of the *chbab srey* in their family relationships. Yet many expressed a deep ambivalence about the poem's messages for women and their assigned subordination in marriage. The lively engagement of the interviewees with the *chbab srey* underlined the importance of the poem in Khmer culture, both in the Cambodian homeland and in the United States. When considering cultural sources for Cambodian widows' reluctance to marry, the author felt that the *chbab srey* might be an appropriate avenue of investigation.

To learn more about these two important cultural sources, the author studied the academic literature (listed in the reference list) to consider cultural influences forming widows' views on marriage. Other information was collected from governmental and other sources that decried the *chbab srey*'s negative influence on women in Cambodia (Grace & Eng, 2015; United Nations Committee on the Elimination of Discrimination Against Women, 2013). The author investigated academic sources on the role of ideologies in maintaining structures of inequality (Berger, 1990; Lengermann & Niebrugge, 1996; Lorber, 1994; Marx, 1978). In pursuing this inquiry, the author

² *Daun-chi* are devout Buddhist women who shave their heads, dress in white robes, and often live on temple grounds. While they devote their lives to pursuing the Buddhist spiritual life, they are nonetheless considered laywomen and not true nuns.

was encouraged by calls for investigation of gender and religion especially in faiths less studied by feminist sociologists such as Buddhism (Avishai, Jafar, & Rinaldo, 2015). These various sources, both experiential and academic, have led to the development of the theoretical position of this article, that ideologies contribute substantially to the persistent subordination of women and that Khmer ideological inequalities in particular can explain Cambodian widows' reluctance to remarry.

Women and Buddhism

To explore the ideological position of women in Cambodian culture, it is appropriate to begin with the view of women in Buddhism, the dominant cultural institution in Cambodian life. A struggle with the demands of family life is at the heart of the Buddhist story. Siddhattha Gotama, the founder of Buddhism, was a prince from the foothills of the Himalayas in the sixth century BC (Armstrong, 2001). He lived a life of comfortable luxury with a loving wife Yasodhara and devoted parents. Shortly after the birth of his first child, however, Gotama rejected conventional family life. He named his infant Rahula or fetter, seeing the baby as a shackle to domestic life that would "prevent [his soul] from soaring to the pinnacle of the universe" (Armstrong, 2001, p. 2). One night, fearing to awake his sleeping wife and son to bid goodbye, Gotama quietly stole away to take up the life of a homeless sage in search of truth. After six years of diligent effort, he found enlightenment while meditating under a tree and became the Buddha, the Enlightened One. He gathered a band of followers and began to teach.

The Buddha's teaching sets the moral boundaries of Cambodian life today. The Buddha's central tenet was that all life is ephemeral and involves suffering. When individuals are reincarnated after death into a new body, they are condemned to repeat the suffering of life over again. Suffering is caused by desire and can only be ended by extinguishing desire through a disciplined moral life. Buddha called this approach the Middle Way, a balance between self-indulgence and extreme asceticism (Armstrong, 2001). Individuals accumulate merit (*bun*) when they follow the Middle Way and avoid behavior that generates demerit (*bap*) (Keyes, 1983). When one has accumulated sufficient merit, one attains *nibbana*, an "inner realm of calm" (Armstrong 2001, 86), and is no longer doomed to continuous rebirth. One is snuffed out, no more condemned to suffer.

The Buddha's teachings appealed to a broad and inclusive swath of society. He did not recognize distinctions of caste or social class (Rahula, 1974). All individuals who followed the Middle Way could accumulate merit and journey towards *nibbana*. With diligent and careful effort, anyone regardless of social background could move into more and more meritorious positions in subsequent incarnations. This leveling dimension of Buddhism can be traced to its emergence during a time of technological innovation in northern India (Sponberg, 1992). By the eighth century BC, the old agrarian social order had given way to an urbanized culture that challenged Brahmanic traditions of caste and gender, raising new questions of meaning and ethics (Sponberg, 1992). The Buddha was one of the seekers of truth that arose in the aftermath of this tumultuous era and many responded to his message of universal salvation, including women.

Early events in the history of Buddhism concerning female disciples contribute to contemporary ideas about women's proper place in society. The Buddha's most prominent female disciple was his mother's sister, Mahapajapati Gotami, who raised him after his mother's death (Walters, 1993). Gotami asked Buddha if she could found an order of female monks or *bhikkhuni* (Armstrong, 2001). Buddha consented but with considerable restrictions. The *bhikkhuni* had to

follow special regulations to ensure that they would be under the supervision of the monks, the *bhikkhus* (King, 2007). All *bhikkuni*, even the most senior, were required to bow down in front of monks, even newly-ordained ones (Collett, 2006). Nuns could not preach to *bhikkhus* and could not hold their own ceremonies (Armstrong, 2001). Nuns could not ordain a new *bhikkhuni* on their own but had to get approval from the monkhood. They had to follow more precepts than monks, 311 precepts compared to monks' 227 precepts (Guthrie, 2004, p. 148). The Buddhist scriptures record that Buddha regretted his action in allowing the *bhikkhuni* order, predicting that the Buddhist faith would last only half as long with women in the *sangha*, the monastic community (Armstrong, 2001; Gross, 1993).

The restrictions on the early *bhikkhuni* order shows that despite the universalism inherent in the Buddha's teaching, women had trouble gaining parity with men in early Buddhism. Sponberg (1992) attributes the ambivalence concerning women to the multiplicity of voices in early Buddhism. Prominent women and their highly placed advocates such as Ananda, Buddha's close assistant, succeeded in persuading Buddha to permit the *bhikkhuni* order, affirming that women are capable of attaining the high Buddhist goal of liberation. Countervailing voices, perhaps among the *bhikkhus* concerned about social propriety, insisted that female monks defer to the male-controlled *sangha* (Sponberg, 1992).

Theravada Buddhism

Theravada Buddhism is the variant found in Cambodia and it is Theravada's views on women's place and capabilities that affect Cambodian women. Theravada Buddhism is the original form of Buddhism found today in Southeast Asia and Sri Lanka. Theravada Buddhism was the dominant form in Cambodia by the 15th century (Harris, 2005) and emphasizes individual effort in the journey towards full enlightenment (Dhammananda, 1993).

Theravada Buddhism teaches that women cannot attain full enlightenment and cannot be leaders of the Buddhist community (Appleton, 2011). It asserts that birth as a woman is inferior to birth as a man (Andaya, 2002; Appleton, 2011; Ebihara, 1968), and women should therefore aspire to be reborn as men (Peach, 2005; J. Van Esterik, 1982). Buddhist tradition has some examples. For instance, the Buddha himself had been a woman in a previous existence (Appleton, 2011). However, it is rare in Buddhist stories for sex to change from one incarnation to the next. For instance, Yasodhara, the Buddha's wife, is always depicted as a female in her previous incarnations (Appleton, 2011).

Women's lower rank is reinforced in Theravada Buddhism by the importance placed on hierarchy. The Theravada Buddhist world is arranged in a hierarchical fashion with a proper order of superordinate and subordinate relationships (Limanonda, 1995). Those lower on the hierarchy owe respect to those higher. In formal organizations such as the *sangha*, junior monks are subordinate to senior ones, and laypersons are subordinate to monks. In the village, young people are subordinate to older people, and villagers are subordinate to the village chief. In the family, children are subordinate to parents, younger siblings are subordinate to older ones, and wives are subordinate to husbands.

This hierarchical arrangement gives order and meaning—*nomos*—to Buddhist societies. Individuals earn merit by accepting their position in the hierarchy graciously. Failing to pay proper respect earns demerit with consequences in this life and after. To question the hierarchical order is not only to challenge the structure of society but also to doubt the truth of Buddhism and to jeopardize one's store of spiritual merit.

Girls and boys learn the importance of hierarchy in their families, the “basic training ground” (Limanonda, 1995, p. 69) for these relationships of respect. They are taught how to behave appropriately to older siblings, parents, grandparents, teachers, and monks as well as the proper relationship between spouses. The father is considered the “master of the house” (Limanonda, 1995, p. 79) and his wife defers to him to maintain family harmony. She carefully avoids any suggestion that she is superior to her husband in order to uphold his honor and standing as head of family. Limanonda (1995) cites a Thai proverb to explain the relationship of husband and wife: “Men are an elephant’s front legs and women the hind ones. Though man and woman are actually two, in marriage they are but one, like the front and hind legs of an elephant. Each helps the other but each must be in his or her proper place according to the natural characteristics of man and woman” (p. 79, attributed to Rajadhon, 1954 as cited in Ellis, 1965, p. 31).

Gendered Merit-Making: Recluses and Householders

The role models provided by religious faith have a powerful impact on the identity and self-esteem of its adherents, both female and male. In Theravada Buddhism, two options exist for the devout: to become a recluse or a householder (P. Van Esterik, 1982b). The recluse, a monk or *bhikkhu*, renounces the world to meditate and focus on detachment from earthly passions. He gives up personal possessions and lives on alms. The householder, by contrast, is still in “the world” (P. Van Esterik, 1982b, p. 56) and supports the *bhikkhus* with alms. To become a recluse is to gain significant merit. Because householders are “rooted in the world” (Kirsch, 1982, p. 21) and attached to worldly concerns, they do not earn as much merit as a recluse.

Both men and women can be householders but only men can be recluses in Theravada Buddhism.³ The *bhikkhuni* order of female monks founded by Mahapajapati Gotami died out in 456 AD (Swearer, 2010). Since that time, women have been barred from the *sangha* and do not have access to the merit acquired by renouncing the world (Guthrie, 2004; Keyes, 1977; Kirsch, 1985). Because they were born female, women are believed to need merit more than men (Kirsch, 1982) but being barred from the *sangha*, they have fewer ways to earn merit and must work harder to accumulate it (Ebihara, 1968).

The extent to which women are separated from the meritorious role of monk is seen in rules forbidding physical contact between women and monks (Kirsch, 1982; Cadge, 2004). Once a man is ordained, he may never again touch a woman. Even the women closest to him, his mother or sister, may no longer touch him (Kirsch, 1982). A woman commits a serious transgression if she touches a monk, polluting his sanctity. The sole exception to this rule was Yasodhara, the wife of the Buddha. When she became his disciple, years after his departure from their marital home, she worshipped him by bowing on the ground but was allowed to touch his feet in reverence and wifely affection. No subsequent women have been permitted this great license with monks.

To earn merit, individuals must carry out their role with diligence. Men’s religious role is to serve as a monk. Some men enter the *sangha* for life and become senior monks, while others stay for a few years. Most men become monks for a brief time during adolescence (Keyes, 1983; Limanonda, 1995). This youthful stay in the monastery benefits the man for life, earning him spiritual merit as well as social prestige. By becoming a monk, even for a few short weeks, men earn merit for their parents too, especially their mother, and repay them a debt of gratitude for having raised them (Limanonda, 1995).

³ In Mahayana Buddhism, by contrast, women are allowed to be nuns; see Gina Cogan (2013).

Since women are not permitted to become monks, they cannot earn either spiritual merit or social prestige from monastic service. This spiritual inequality has life-long ramifications. Women cannot repay their parents by becoming monks and instead show their gratitude by looking after the parents and marrying a man with resources (Limanonda, 1995). While men repay their parents with a few weeks in the monkhood, women must spend a lifetime showing their gratitude to their parents. Even their choice of marriage partner is governed by their concern for their parents, not their own preferences.

Khmer Buddhist ceremonies provide a visual example of the subordinate role of women in Theravada Buddhism. In the typical ceremony, monks in saffron robes sit cross-legged on a dais, typically one to two feet high, while the congregation sits on the floor facing them. The congregants greet the monks by raising their palms together in front of their face and bowing reverently. While laymen have the option and often the experience of sitting on the dais, laywomen are permanently excluded from that prestigious space. The worship experience of women is that they sit lower and reverence men, seated higher. Even the *daun-chi*, the female lay devotees, must sit on the floor, reverencing the male monks. The common recurring experience of higher men and lower women conveys resoundingly the relative ideological status of men and women in Khmer society.

Despite the inferior rank of women in Theravada Buddhism, there are many ways that women can earn merit and advance in spiritual worth. The principal way is motherhood (Andaya, 2002). The high value Cambodians place on motherhood is demonstrated by a common Khmer proverb: “A father is worth a thousand friends and a mother worth a thousand fathers” (Ebihara, 1968). When a young man enters the monastic order, Theravada Buddhists consider that his mother has given him to the *sangha*. She then earns a great store of merit for her support of the monkhood (Andaya, 2002; Keyes, 1983; Kirsch, 1982; Swearer, 2010).

In addition to providing sons to the *sangha*, women earn merit by giving offerings of food to monks (Andaya, 2002; Swearer, 2010). Buddhist monks are prohibited from earning their living through ordinary means and rely on donations from the faithful. Part of a monk’s daily routine is to walk from house to house with his begging bowl, symbol of his monastic vocation. Since women are in charge of household food, women are the ones who feed the monkhood (Cadge, 2004). On festival days, when prepared food is brought to the temple and presented to the monks ceremonially, the role of women in supporting the *sangha* is clearly evident. Women accumulate spiritual merit through these donations of prepared food (Andaya, 2002; Appleton, 2011; Swearer, 2010).

Women may also earn merit by giving alms to monks or by contributing to the construction of a temple. For most ordinary rural women, however, the cash needed for such donations is in short supply. So the most common meritorious donations for rural women are food and sons. Despite their official status as spiritually inferior to men, women support the *sangha* significantly through these donations (Cadge, 2004; Keyes, 1984).

The *Chbab Srey*

The ideological inequality of women inculcated through Khmer Buddhist ceremonies is reinforced by a classical Cambodian moral code, the *chbab srey*⁴ or “rules for women.” The poem is modeled on a sermon given by the Buddha to five hundred young monks and was originally composed by Prince Ang Doung in 1837 (Ledgerwood, 1990). Cambodian girls memorize this

⁴ *Chbab* means rules or law, *srey* means woman or female.

poem as part of their education and recite it as a musical chant. At an early age, they absorb from this poem Khmer social expectations for proper female behavior. As a royal poem based on a sermon by the Buddha, the *chbab srey* has a powerful influence in Khmer society.

The poem conveys the instructions that Queen Vimala gives to her daughter in preparation for her wedding (Harris, 2005). It describes a hierarchical relationship in which the wife is subordinate to the husband, waiting on him and deferring to him. The poem outlines the wife's role, to create and safeguard her home as a place of domestic harmony, a quiet refuge for her husband. When the wife behaves well, she brings credit to herself, to her husband, and to her natal family. The wife who diligently obeys the precepts of the *chbab srey* will be known by everyone as a "*sri grap lakkhana*,"⁵ a "perfectly virtuous woman" (Ledgerwood, 1990, p. 24.)

A key characteristic of the virtuous woman is that she is quiet and unobtrusive. A popular verse instructs women to walk without making a sound: "When a virtuous woman walks, the sound of her silk skirt rustling cannot be heard" (Ledgerwood, 1990, p. 98). When women speak, they must not make a big clatter but use only "soft and sweet" tones (Ledgerwood, 1990, p. 98). They must be careful not to engage in gossip with other women. Gossip is seen as fire that can destroy the domestic harmony women must safeguard. They must not repeat their mother's criticisms of their husband or complain to the mother about the husband. The virtuous woman must speak softly to her husband at all times even if her husband angrily curses her. "She is advised to go to bed and think the situation over. Then she should return to him speaking soft words and forgiving him" (Ledgerwood, 1990, p. 98).

In addition to speaking softly, the virtuous woman must be careful not to speak too much. The *chbab srey* views a talkative woman as a competitor with her husband. "If she talks too much, she wants to be 'bigger' than her husband" (Ledgerwood, 1990, p. 100). When others see how the wife succeeds in talking more than the husband, they will look down on him and he will fall in the esteem of his village. The wife must not disrespect her husband even if he is poor, lazy, or less educated than the wife. Even if he drinks excessively or gambles, she must not think herself better than him.

The perfectly virtuous wife, as presented by the *chbab srey*, aims to fulfill four roles in her relationship with her husband: mother, friend, fellow, and servant (vv. 126-148) (Harris 2005, p. 88). The respect that the wife gave her parents as a child must be transferred to the husband. Even her physical movements are restricted around her husband. She may not reach in front of him or step across his outstretched legs. "Before she may even reach to remove a louse from his hair, she must raise her hands pressed together and bow before him in a gesture of extreme respect" (Ledgerwood, 1990, p. 101). The *chbab srey* instructs the virtuous wife to be sexually available to her husband. The rules condemn the wife who sleeps "with her back to her husband" (v. 21) (Ledgerwood, 1990, p. 116). Even if her husband takes a mistress, the wife should be "calm and not offended, not disappointed" (v. 26) (Ledgerwood, 1990, p. 99). She should continue to maintain domestic harmony so that when the husband regains his senses, he will return to the place of refuge she has created.

In addition to requiring deferential behavior, the *chbab srey* exhorts the virtuous wife to work hard and keep the household in order. She should not go off visiting while there is household work to be done. "Never get up and leave the weaving on the loom to go off visiting at someone's

⁵ This is Judy Ledgerwood's Romanization of this term.

house” (Ledgerwood, 1990, p. 104). If family fortunes fail, it is due to the wife’s lack of diligence in keeping her husband on the right track.⁶

The *chbab srey* portrays a patriarchal household order with acute ideological inequalities. The husband is viewed as the wife’s superior no matter his behavior. The wife is not permitted to criticize her husband in person or to her family or closest confidantes. She must wait on him as a servant. She must work hard to further the family fortunes even if her husband gambles away her hard-earned resources. She is not permitted to refuse his sexual advances. If she violates these rules, she brings dishonor to herself, her husband, and her family. For a woman to be seen as virtuous, she must submit to this subordinate role. If she rebels, she will be considered a bad wife, losing social prestige and jeopardizing her spiritual worth.

The *chbab srey* is set in a legendary context of a queen and her princess daughter. The elite setting is reflected in the instructions about skirt-rustling. A silk skirt rustles and requires the wearer to step delicately in order to avoid making noise. Most Cambodian women rarely wear silk skirts, however. Rural women wear woven cotton sarongs that never rustle. Only for a rare wedding or other festival would a rural woman wear costly silk. The oft-quoted verse uses silk more as a metaphor than a literal instruction: the woman is to be quiet and unobtrusive, not putting herself forward, deferential and compliant. If the daughter of a queen must be deferential to her husband, how much more a young rural woman? By following the *chbab srey*, the young rural woman aligns herself with powerful royal figures, elite standards for ordinary working people.

The *chbab srey* became part of the core curriculum in Cambodian schools in the twentieth century (Smith-Hefner, 1999) and generations of women have internalized its rules as the social ideal. Under the leadership of the Cambodian Ministry of Women’s Affairs, the *chbab srey* was recently pulled out of the Cambodian primary school curriculum. An abridged version continues to be taught in secondary school grades, however, as traditional Khmer literature. Women activists challenge the ongoing instruction of girls in the *chbab srey*, noting that girls learn the *chbab srey* without any gender analysis (Grace & Eng, 2015). In addition, the precepts of the *chbab srey* are deeply ingrained in rural areas, reinforcing gender expectations for rural women and girls (United Nations Committee on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination Against Women, 2013).

Discussion: Why Widows Don’t Remarry

The *chbab srey* and the practices of Khmer Buddhism contribute significantly to the gendered ideological framework of Cambodian society. Girls and women thoroughly internalize the subordinate place assigned to them, learning with regular repetition that men are superior to women in the temple. They are taught in school that women should serve men. Even though Cambodian women have “relative sexual equality” (Winzeler, 1982, p. 211) when economic matters are considered, they have substantial ideological inequality when cultural values are assessed.

The views that Cambodian widows hold of remarriage become more comprehensible when seen against the backdrop of this ideological inequality. When women lose their husband, they ironically gain more authority than they have ever had in their lives (Chen, 2000; Owen, 1996). Khmer widows no longer have to defer to a male head of household. They are no longer accountable to him for the management of the household funds. They do not have to serve a husband as spelled out in the *chbab srey*. While widows usually lose income with their husband’s

⁶ Traditional folk tales, such as the “Mea Yoeng” story contrasting the good wife and the bad wife, reinforce this idea of the wife’s financial responsibility for the household (Ledgerwood, 1990, 1994).

death, they gain substantial freedom (Derks, 2005; Kusakabe, Wang, & Kelkar, 1995). They have the undisputed right, for the first time since birth, to make their own decisions without deferring to a parent or husband. It is a rare and valuable change in status for a Khmer woman.

Remarriage threatens a widow's newfound authority. If she were to remarry, a widow would revert to the subordinate status described in the *chbab srey*. Interviews with Cambodian widows reveal that they sometimes have unhappy memories of their marriage (Lee, 2006, p. 46). Some have been abandoned during a pregnancy and left penniless. Their husbands sometimes lied about having a second wife in another village, or gambled and drank excessively. Widows remembered that their hard-earned money had evaporated with a husband's irresponsible behavior. In the light of these memories of subordination, many widows do not relish a new marriage. "One husband was enough!" one widow exclaimed (Lee, 2006, p. 46).

From the perspective of Buddhist merit, remarriage puts widows in an awkward bind. To earn merit, women have to be good wives and good mothers. But those two roles might conflict in a new marriage. A good Theravada wife graciously accepts her husband's authority and avoids challenging him. But the new husband might ignore the best interests of the widow's children such as paying their school fees. If the husband has children of his own, family resources would be split with his children. Widows would not be able to be both a good wife (subordinate to her husband) and a good mother (protecting her children). Instead of earning merit (*bun*) in a new marriage, widows would run the risk of accumulating demerit (*bap*). "I wanted to be independent for the sake of my children," one widow said (Lee, 2006, p. 46).

Widows have a better avenue of earning merit without the risk of *bap*. Widows can accumulate merit through focusing on their motherhood role. Good Buddhist mothers take care of their children diligently and raise sons for the *sangha*. They bring food to the temple to offer to monks and attend religious services. Widows have these motherhood avenues to merit without the necessity of remarriage. They do not need to subordinate themselves to a husband as a household servant. They do not need to give up their own authority and defer to a husband's judgment. They do not need to put their children's wellbeing at risk by bringing a new male authority into the household. They can both protect their children and earn merit solely through motherhood.

When seen in the cultural context of ideological inequality, widows' reluctance to remarry becomes more comprehensible. The possible economic benefit of a new husband is erased in widows' minds by the ideological cost of subordination in remarriage and its ramifications for household decision-making. The established social order—the *nomos*—of gender hierarchies reinforced by the Buddhist cosmic outlook create an inhospitable environment for a marriage that would be fair to them and to their children.

While widows' decisions about remarriage become comprehensible against the backdrop of ideological inequalities, there are nonetheless significant negative consequences for the financial well-being of their households. Without an adult partner to share the household work and build up family savings, widows' families are more likely to suffer hunger before the new harvest. Children of widows are less likely to go to school regularly due to less disposable cash in the household. As adults, they are less likely to be able to support their elderly mother. Medical emergencies are more likely to deplete family savings and force the sale of precious agricultural land to pay for doctors and hospital stays. The sturdy practice of female subordination anchored in religious belief and social custom has dire economic consequences and contributes to the hardship of the most vulnerable families. Culture impacts structure in powerful, persistent ways.

To challenge the customary practice of female subordination is to question the meaningful cultural world, the *nomos* that gives stability to Khmer culture. Such a cultural challenge would be

especially hard for Cambodians whose society was roiled with turmoil by the aggressive Khmer Rouge erasure of Khmer culture and imposition of Maoist communism. Many Cambodians still suffer mental and emotional distress from the memories of that lethal time. The resuscitation of traditional cultural institutions such as the revival of the *sangha* and the recovery of classical dance has brought resurrection and hope to Cambodian life. How can gendered ideological inequalities be challenged without reviving the anxieties of renewed cultural annihilation?

A possible avenue is suggested by the widows' choice of an alternative within traditional culture, focusing on motherhood rather than marriage as an avenue to merit. By working within traditional cultural forms, change can be brought about without provoking cultural anxiety. If cultural beliefs and practices that sustain ideological inequalities can be modified without completely rejecting traditional culture, change can happen in a way that retains cultural authenticity and social order while creating greater gender equality. Instead of ideological inequalities that subordinate women, modified cultural arrangements can create ideological *equalities* that nurture both men and women.

A route to greater ideological equalities might be to improve the status of women within Khmer Buddhism. For instance, if *bhikkhuni* ordination were restored in Khmer Buddhism, it would have a significant influence on the ideological status of women in Cambodia. Women in saffron robes seated on the dais would signal an endorsement of female worth that would surely raise the value of women in Cambodian households. *Bhikkhuni* ordination has been restored in one Theravada country, Sri Lanka (Sirimanne, 2016), and it is conceivable that it could take place in Cambodia as well.

Short of female ordination, laywomen could take a greater role in leading religious ceremonies. *Daun-chi* could be invited to sit on the dais with the monks and lead community prayers. Donations to *daun-chi* could be considered merit-making as offerings to monks are, allowing more women to devote their lives to the study of Buddhism. Girls could be admitted to the temple for religious study in their teen years as boys are, temporarily adopting the monastic lifestyle as an initiation into Khmer moral adulthood.

The role of the *chbab srey* in Khmer education could be further reviewed, treating the traditional poem as part of Khmer literature while problematizing its portrait of female subordination. Public school teachers could be sensitized to the gender implications of the *chbab srey* on girls in their formative years and offered a curriculum to analyze gender expectations in their historical context. To counter the traditional weight of the *chbab srey* in rural areas, a new *chbab* could be developed for both boys and girls, modeling relationships of mutual aid, consideration, and respect. It could be crafted into a literary work to be chanted as the traditional *chbab* is, a new anthem of gender equality. These innovations would build upon traditional Khmer culture and create authentic Khmer expressions of gender equality.

Conclusion

This study underlines the importance of considering the ideological context of female subordination as a way to explain its persistence. As Penny Van Esterik (1982a) noted with such insight, women's economic roles alone are insufficient to explain gender hierarchies; ideological beliefs and practices must be considered as well. Ideological inequalities perpetuate female subordination in an enduring expression of patriarchal domination. Cambodian culture illustrates this important dynamic. Cambodian religion and literature structure gender ideals that are absorbed from an early age and reinforced through adulthood in religious ceremonies and household

practices. The impact of ideological subordination has special significance for widows and their children when remarriage signifies a loss of independence and self-respect.

Yet the impact of cultural beliefs does not have to be negative. Culture can serve ideals of equality and fair play. New ideological equalities such as those suggested above can harness the substantial power of culture to challenge centuries-long female subordination. The result of a greater gender balance in cultural beliefs and practices would be more equality in societal structures. With the cultural path made more straight and fair, women and girls would be able to participate in social, economic, and political life with fewer barriers. The gender landscape would be more gentle, pleasant, and inviting. Then married life might be more appealing to widows who would not have to choose between marital subordination and poverty. With such cultural changes, generations to come could be socialized into ideological equalities and internalize a *nomos* of gender balance and harmony, a new social construction of gender for the twenty-first century.

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