



Indonesian Journal of Theology

Vol. 9, No. 1 (Juli 2021): 23-40

E-ISSN: [2339-0751](https://doi.org/10.46567/ijt.v9i1.170)

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.46567/ijt.v9i1.170>

**“WE BELIEVE THE BIBLE”
Cambodian Women in Christian Leadership,
1953–Present**

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Abstract

Christianity is a small but growing minority in Cambodia, accounting for only about 3% of the population yet growing there at a rate faster than in any other country in Southeast Asia. In Cambodian Christian communities, it is not uncommon to find more women than men in the churches. Cambodian boys often spend a brief period of their youth as novice monks at Theravada Buddhist monasteries, during which time they have the opportunity to become familiar with the Pali language and holy texts. Girls are not afforded this same opportunity, as there are no nuns (*bhikkhuni*) in contemporary Theravada. Within the Christian community in Cambodia, women carry out much of the service work in the churches, but only rarely are they invited to preach, let alone to become pastors—as is the case in much of the world. This article, based on interviews and participant observation with evangelical churches in Cambodia in 2019, demonstrates the ways in which ministry carried out by women has been characterized by courageous creativity, empowered through physical distance, and undergirded by a resoluteness of vocation.

Keywords: Cambodia, women, evangelicalism, Christian and Missionary Alliance, preaching

Abstrak

Kekristenan adalah komunitas minoritas yang kecil secara jumlah namun terus berkembang di Kamboja, terhitung hanya 3% dari populasi namun komunitas ini berkembang dengan kecepatan yang lebih cepat dibandingkan negara-negara lain di Asia Tenggara. Di dalam komunitas-komunitas Kristen Kamboja sangatlah lazim ditemukan lebih banyak perempuan dibandingkan laki-laki di dalam gereja. Anak laki-laki Kamboja seringkali menghabiskan

sebagian kecil masa muda mereka sebagai seorang biksu pemula di kuil-kuil Buddha Theravada, yang mana pada masa-masa itu mereka mempelajari Bahasa Pali dan juga kitab suci. Anak-anak perempuan tidak mendapatkan kesempatan yang sama dikarenakan tidak ada posisi biarawati (biksuni) di dalam komunitas Buddha Theravada masa kini. Di dalam komunitas Kristen Kamboja, perempuan-perempuan banyak mengerjakan pelayanan di gereja-gereja, tapi mereka sangatlah jarang mendapatkan kesempatan untuk berkhotbah, apalagi untuk menjadi seorang pendeta—sebagaimana kasus-kasus yang terjadi di banyak tempat di bagian belahan dunia lain. Artikel ini, yang didasarkan atas wawancara-wawancara dan juga pengamatan partisipatif di gereja-gereja injili di Kamboja pada tahun 2019, menunjukkan cara-cara bagaimana pelayanan dilakukan oleh para perempuan yang dicirikan oleh kreativitas yang berani, pemberdayaan melalui jarak secara fisik, dan ditopang oleh ketegasan dalam panggilan mereka.

Kata-kata Kunci: Kamboja, perempuan, evangelikalisme, *Christian and Missionary Alliance*, khotbah.

Introduction

Christianity is a small but growing minority in Cambodia, accounting for less than 3% of the population yet growing there at a rate faster than any other country in Southeast Asia, with a 5.4% increase between 1970 and 2020.¹ As is often the case the world over,² it is not uncommon to find more women than men in Cambodian churches. One reason for this discrepancy could be that within Cambodian Theravada Buddhism, women do not have the opportunity to become nuns (*bbikkhuni*), as the “valid ordination rite for female religious died out many centuries ago.”³ Cambodian boys often spend a brief period of their youth as novice monks at Theravada Buddhist monasteries,⁴ during which time they have the opportunity to become familiar with the Pali language and holy texts—and not to mention, to earn merit, with which they are already believed to be endowed more than are girls at birth—but girls are not afforded this same opportunity, as there currently exists no pathway to ordination for Cambodian Buddhist

¹ Kenneth Ross, Francis D. Alvarez, and Todd M. Johnson, “Christianity by Country,” in *Christianity in East and Southeast Asia*, eds., Kenneth Ross, Francis D. Alvarez, and Todd M. Johnson (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2020), 495-500.

² Dana L. Robert, *Christian Mission: How Christianity Became a World Religion* (Hoboken, NJ: Wiley-Blackwell, 2009), 74.

³ Ian Harris, *Cambodian Buddhism: History and Practice* (Honolulu, HI: University of Hawai'i Press, 2005), 74.

⁴ Ibid.

women in the Theravada tradition.⁵ There have been movements for women’s ordination elsewhere in the Theravada world, including a successful movement of this kind in Sri Lanka,⁶ but such efforts have not taken hold in Cambodia.⁷ Women who are interested in religious service may become *don chi*, who typically “observe most of the precepts of a novice monk” and assist with various types of service around the monastery, but they are not always included in the spiritual activities in which the monks participate.⁸ Similarly, although many Christian denominations in Cambodia also have not ordained women, there have long been Cambodian evangelical women who, along with their missionary counterparts from both the Global North and the Global South, have sought ways to contribute to the development of evangelical Christianity in the country.

Drawing primarily on annual missionary reports (1953-2009) from the Christian and Missionary Alliance (CMA) in Cambodia and on ethnographic fieldwork from interviews and participant-observation I conducted with evangelical, non-denominational communities in Cambodia during the spring of 2019, this article demonstrates the ways in which ministry carried out by Cambodian women has been characterized by courageous creativity, empowered through physical distance, and undergirded by a resoluteness of vocation. All my interlocutors, regardless of which church they attended, have been without exception shaped by the ministry of the CMA—at minimum, through the lasting influence of the early missionaries and local pastors associated with the denomination’s ministry in the country, beginning in 1923. The most visible vestiges of the early CMA mission that can be found throughout the Cambodian Christian community include the following: the Khmer Old Version of the Bible (KHOV), to which many of my interlocutors have an undying loyalty, despite the more recent publication of the significantly simplified Khmer Standard Version (KSV) in 1997 and 2005;⁹ the first hymnal, which was

⁵ Elizabeth Guthrie, “Khmer Buddhism, Female Asceticism, and Salvation,” in *History, Buddhism, and New Religious Movements in Cambodia*, eds., John Marston and Elizabeth Guthrie (Honolulu, HI: University of Hawai’i Press, 2004), 148.

⁶ Monica Lindberg Falk, *Making Fields of Merit: Buddhist Female Ascetics and Gendered Orders in Thailand* (Copenhagen: Nordic Institute of Asian Studies Press, 2007), 25.

⁷ Guthrie, “Khmer Buddhism, Female Asceticism, and Salvation,” 148.

⁸ Harris, *Cambodian Buddhism*, 74.

⁹ Although both translations necessarily depend a fair amount on words and concepts rooted in a Cambodian religious cosmology combining elements of Theravada Buddhism, indigenous Cambodian religion, and Hinduism, many of my evangelical interlocutors regarded the KHOV with severe suspicion due to the degree of religious hybridity they attributed to the text.

composed of Western hymns translated into Khmer and is now often seen conjoined with the newer hymnal comprising songs written in Khmer and set to indigenous tunes by former refugee camp ministers Barnabas Mam and Sarin Sam;¹⁰ and many, if not most, of the individual and communal devotional practices and postures that accompanied Cambodian Christian evangelists into the refugee camps in Thailand during and after the Cambodian Genocide (1975-1979), including Sabbath-keeping¹¹ and teetotalism.¹²

While taking note of the relevant contributions of male and female missionaries from the United States, Canada, France, Hong Kong, the Philippines, Singapore, and elsewhere, I focus in this article on the work and experiences of Cambodian women in various forms of ministry. As Martha Frederiks has written, in order to acknowledge “that the history of Christianity is an intercultural history,” it is worthwhile to “uncove[r] the traces of marginalized groups in the archival materials, so as to adjust the male white missionary perception of the events.”¹³ Although Frederiks admits that such traces can be difficult to come by, she asserts that it is indeed “possible to unearth lists of local, female etc workers” and thereby to arrive at “some tentative conclusions about the impact and influence of local agents and women in the development of a local church and local theology.”¹⁴ To attempt to ascertain the stories of those local women who impacted the development of evangelical Christianity in Cambodia prior to the genocide, I have sought to piece together some of the rare mentions of their contributions. As for the living women

¹⁰ Karen B. Westerfield Tucker, “Methodism’s ‘World Parish’: Liturgical and Hymnological Migrations in Three Ecclesiastical Generations,” in *Liturgy in Migration: From the Upper Room to Cyberspace*, ed., Teresa Berger (Collegeville, MN: Liturgical Press, 2012), 145-46; cf. Barnabas Mam, “Cambodia,” in *Christianity in East and Southeast Asia*, eds., Kenneth Ross, Francis D. Alvarez, and Todd M. Johnson (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2020), 179.

¹¹ Briana Wong, “The Historical Interface between Buddhism and Christianity in Cambodia, with Special Attention to the Christian and Missionary Alliance, 1923–1970,” *Buddhist-Christian Studies*, Vol. 40 (2020): 264.

¹² The CMA denomination itself has since transitioned to a policy of “moderation in the use of alcohol, not abstinence,” even while generally prohibiting the use of alcohol at events associated with the denomination, “in recognition of [the] Alliance tradition of abstinence.” See The Christian and Missionary Alliance (The Alliance), “Alcohol and Marijuana Use,” <http://www.cmalliance.org/about/beliefs/perspectives/addictive-practices>.

¹³ Martha Frederiks, “Mission or Submission? – From Mission History towards an Intercultural History of Christianity: Case-Study The Gambia,” in *Mission Revisited: Between Mission History and Intercultural Theology*, ed. Volker Küster (Berlin: LIT Verlag, 2010), 81.

¹⁴ *Ibid.*, 82.

ministers¹⁵ whom I feature in this article, I am grateful to have had the chance to hear their stories from their own mouths and to have been in community with them through my ethnographic fieldwork.

In the years leading up to the Cambodian Genocide, Cambodian women working with the CMA often gained entrée into the world of church leadership through their roles as pastors’ wives or employees of church-adjacent ministries—such as organizations dedicated to formal or informal Christian education, especially of other women or youth. These roles kept them out of the spotlight, and sometimes completely out of sight, where they had the best opportunity to live into their ministerial vocations without attracting the criticism of the male leaders in authority over them. Today, there are more opportunities for women to preach in Cambodia than in previous generations, but evangelical women leaders in Cambodia still often rely on this same type of qualification by adjacency, in which their authority to preach or otherwise lead in church tends to stem not from a position of power within the church hierarchy, but from a title granted by a related but distinct institution.

Following a brief historical introduction to evangelical Christianity in Cambodia, the article consists of three sections, with the first two drawing on denominational reports from the CMA archives, and the second, on my own fieldwork. The first section, *Courageous Creativity*, calls attention to some of the ways in which Cambodian evangelical women resourcefully carved out space for themselves in male-dominated ministry spaces. The second section, *The Power of Physical Distance: Opportunities through Invisibility*, emphasizes the relative freedom that physical distance afforded such women as they pursued their ministerial endeavors. The invisibility inherent in radio- or mail-based ministries created opportunities for women to operate with a certain measure of flexibility—however limited—in their Christian service. The third section, *Resoluteness of Vocation: Cambodian Evangelical Women in Ministry Today*, makes the case that present-day Cambodian evangelical women often solidify their own sense of divine call through what I have termed “qualification by adjacency”—that is, deriving one’s vocational affirmation from one’s occupying a position of power in an institution associated with the church yet nevertheless separate from it.

Historical Background

In 1923, two American married couples under the auspices of the CMA arrived in Cambodia, being the first evangelical missionaries to do so. Arthur and Esther Hammond moved to the

¹⁵ I have assigned each of my interlocutors a pseudonym for their protection and privacy.

capital city of Phnom Penh and began working on a Bible translation that would eventually become known as the KHOV, in collaboration with Cambodian consultants, both Buddhist and Christian.¹⁶ Meanwhile, their colleagues, David and Muriel Ellison, settled in Battambang in the northwest of the country that same year and founded the first Protestant Bible school in that city two years after their arrival.¹⁷ Cambodia received its independence from France in 1953, and in 1965, Prince Sihanouk ordered all American Protestant missionaries to leave the country. The CMA workers from the United States feared for the community they had founded, unsure whether it would survive without their oversight. Upon the American missionaries' return in 1970, following Sihanouk's overthrow by the pro-US General Lon Nol, they were surprised—and, perhaps, humbled—to see that Christianity in Cambodia had not only survived but flourished in their absence.¹⁸

The years between 1970 and 1975 in Cambodia were marked by both a bitter civil war and a time of religious ferment within the CMA congregations there.¹⁹ In April 1975, Pol Pot's Khmer Rouge insurgents took over Phnom Penh and announced the beginning of a new nation, titled Democratic Kampuchea, which would be characterized by a return to a mythical agrarian past and would draw on Maoist principles. In the process of establishing their revolutionary regime, the Khmer Rouge forced the inhabitants of Cambodia's cities into the countryside, reorganized the entire country into work camps, separated families, abolished banks and money, persecuted and often killed practitioners of Christianity and Islam, defrocked Buddhist monks,²⁰ and killed approximately 1.7 million people, constituting approximately one-fifth of Cambodia's population²¹ in what has come to be known as the Cambodian Genocide.

In the years during and, especially, immediately following these mass atrocities, hundreds of thousands of refugees made their way to camps along the Thai-Cambodian border. Only “a few hundred” Christians of any tradition survived,²² some of whom

¹⁶ Kenton J. Clymer, *Troubled Relations: The United States and Cambodia since 1870* (DeKalb, IL: Northern Illinois University Press, 2007), 10.

¹⁷ Don Cormack, *Killing Fields, Living Fields: An Unfinished Portrait of the Cambodian Church* (Sevenoaks, Kent, UK: OMF Publishing, 2009), Appendix III: 300 BC–2009 Timeline, Kindle.

¹⁸ *Annual Report Cambodian Field – 1971*, 1, The Christian and Missionary Alliance National Archives, Colorado Springs, CO, USA.

¹⁹ A. Eugene Hall, Untitled, 1, *1975 Annual Report*, CMA National Archives, Colorado Springs, CO, USA.

²⁰ Alexander Laban Hinton, *Why Did They Kill?: Cambodia in the Shadow of Genocide* (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 2005), 1.

²¹ “Cambodian Genocide Project,” Yale University, <https://gsp.yale.edu/case-studies/cambodian-genocide-program>.

²² Mam, “Cambodia,” 179.

also fled to the Thai-Cambodian border and were eager to introduce their faith to others. Many Buddhists during this time found themselves disaffected with the religion of their youth,²³ feeling that it had failed to prevent or offer solace concerning the horrors they had collectively endured.²⁴ Theoretically, the karmic restitution system in Theravada Buddhism explains all events, whether one experiences them as favorable or unfavorable, as the result of one’s own actions in past lives. Many wondered, was it really possible for everyone in the entire nation to have deserved this fate? In the midst of the chaos of Khmer Rouge rule, many Cambodians found themselves forced into participating in activities, which they immediately regretted and which plagued them with remorse for years afterwards. Under the circumstances, Cambodian refugees converted to Christianity in droves. Many converted while in refugee camps or later attended churches led by ministers whose faith had developed during their time at the Thai border. After the Vietnamese army overthrew the Khmer Rouge in early 1979, the Cambodian Christian community began to grow. The Vietnamese-backed government in Cambodia restricted Christianity until 1990, but Christians nevertheless continued to meet in the interim. The new, evangelical community in Cambodia included previous members of the church who were returning from the refugee camps, namely Christians who had converted while in Khmer Rouge work camps or through the ministries of missionaries and Cambodian Christians in the camps, in addition to refugees who had resettled in “third countries” but felt drawn back to their homeland for the sake of mission.

Today, the Cambodian branch of the CMA, known as the Khmer Evangelical Church (KEC), still does not ordain women, but women nevertheless remain involved in numerous aspects of congregational and denominational leadership. According to David Manfred, a missionary who has been in Cambodia since 1995²⁵ and currently holds the position of field director for the CMA in the country, women in Cambodia are involved not only in leadership within the KEC’s national ministries for women and children, but approximately 20% of KEC churches and house churches—approximately two hundred in total—are led by women, as well. Additionally, women serve in KEC ministries oriented towards evangelization and spiritual mentorship and—in cases of rare

²³ Michael Vickery, *Cambodia: 1975-1982* (Boston, MA: South End Press, 1984), 12.

²⁴ Cf. Carol Mortland, “Khmer Buddhists in the United States: Ultimate Questions,” in *Cambodian Culture since 1975: Homeland and Exile*, eds., May M. Ebihara, Carol A. Mortland, and Judy Ledgerwood (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1994), 72.

²⁵ Steve Westergren, “Report of the Field Director: Field Forum June 1995,” *1995 Reports*, The CMA National Archives, Colorado Springs, CO, USA.

exception—on committees at the levels of regional and national leadership. Notably, two women—one, a local leader, and the other, a missionary—served on the sub-committee that recently “revised [the KEC’s] process for ordination.”²⁶

Despite the fact that the oldest evangelical organization in Cambodia does not officially ordain women, multiple others do, including the Methodist Church, along with several Pentecostal and Charismatic denominations. About 78% percent of Cambodia’s Christian population is Pentecostal/Charismatic, making it the country with the highest percentage of Christians in that category in Southeast Asia, being twice as high as the percentage corresponding to the runner-up, the Philippines, where 38% of Christians self-identify as members of Pentecostal/Charismatic communities.²⁷ One such denomination, the Foursquare Church, claims both “to be the fastest-growing church in Cambodia” and to have nearly one million members within the country.²⁸ The Foursquare Church maintains a global commitment to “intentionally prepare and release men and women across generations and cultures into all positions of leadership and areas of ministry,” including the pastorate.²⁹

Courageous Creativity

Women looking to serve with the CMA in a capacity alternative to or in addition to the role of missionaries’ or pastors’ wives often had to find resourceful ways to thrive within denominational restrictions, push against them, or both. In 1960, the leader of the ministry to young people in Takeo, located in southern Cambodia, was “a young lady” who expressed interest in “atten[ding] Long Term Bible School next year if it is open to girls.”³⁰ At the time, only male students were enrolled at the school, but the following year, the long-term training program at the Bible

²⁶ David Manfred, email conversation, October 20, 2020.

²⁷ Gina A. Zurlo, “A Demographic Profile of Christianity in East and Southeast Asia,” in *Christianity in East and Southeast Asia*, eds., Kenneth Ross, Francis D. Alvarez, and Todd M. Johnson (Edinburgh: University of Edinburgh Press, 2020), 9.

²⁸ Barnabas Mam notes that “[m]any researchers on church growth and church planting in Cambodia find it hard to accept these figures,” but that despite “some tension between missionaries and local leadership, the FCC is actively planting churches and building orphanage centres all over Cambodia.” Mam, “Cambodia,” 183.

²⁹ Marcia Graham, “Global Distinctives Announced by Foursquare Global Council,” *The Foursquare Church: News + Resources*, 8 October 2015, <https://resources.foursquare.org/global-distinctives-announced-by-foursquare-global-council/>.

³⁰ “Annual Report, Takeo Station, 1960,” 3, *1960 Annual Report Cambodia*, The CMA Archives, Colorado Springs, CO, USA.

school, which had relocated from Battambang to the city of Ta Khmau in 1949, opened its door to female students, too.³¹

The 1960 Annual Report of the CMA announced that in the province of Kompong Thom, a Christian women’s group had begun meeting once a month, and that the participants of this group regularly took up an offering to support “the only national woman worker in Cambodia,”³² identified only as a “Bible woman” known as “Mrs. Nai.”³³ In a 1963 report by Muriel Ellison following the death of her own husband, she notes that Nai had moved to Battambang to partner in ministry with her there and that Nai’s 80 year-old mother had accompanied her. Historically, in Cambodia, married daughters are expected to stay home in order to care for their aging parents; this is only now beginning to change.³⁴ Committed to faithfulness in her roles both as a daughter and as a minister, Nai was willing to relocate for ministry purposes but brought along her mother, who “was able to attend Christmas festivities ... where she met with a number of other 80 year-old women and ... has been happier since.”³⁵

The Power of Physical Distance: Opportunities through Invisibility?

Within the CMA, Cambodian women sometimes participated in long-distance forms of ministry, perhaps finding leniency under circumstances in which they were invisible to those to whom they ministered, and vice versa. Depending on the context, the Khmer word for “preach,” /psaay/, can mean, “to spread,” “to broadcast,” “to prop[a]gate,” “to publish,” or “to announce.” One common usage is in the phrase /psaay bantaa

³¹ “Cambodia: Annual Report of the Chairman, 1961,” 5, The CMA Archives, Colorado Springs, CO, USA. By contrast, according to the chairman’s annual report in 1961, the Short Term Bible School at Ta Khmau already had been coeducational for six years.

³² Joseph E. Doty, “Narrative Report for Kompong Thom District,” *1960 Annual Report*, 3, The Christian and Missionary Alliance National Archives, Colorado Springs, CO, USA.

³³ Harry M. Taylor, *1960 Annual Report*, 2, The Christian and Missionary Alliance National Archives, Colorado Springs, CO, USA.

³⁴ Vorn Searivoth, “The New Trend of Parent Care in Cambodia,” *Asia Times*, 2 June 2019, <https://asiatimes.com/2019/06/the-new-trend-of-parent-care-in-cambodia/>. Now, it is worth noting that the annual reports I encountered, which contained information on Mrs. Nai, never mentioned a husband. Following traditional American conventions pertaining to the use of gendered honorifics, the CMA annual reports from the 1960s tended to assign women the title “Miss” if unmarried and “Mrs.” if married, whether in the past or present; it is possible, therefore, that she was a widow. Even if this was the case, Nai still retained the responsibility to look after her mother.

³⁵ Muriel Ellison, “Narrative Report: Battambang District, 1963,” 2, *1963 Cambodian Annual Narrative Report*, The CMA National Archives, Colorado Springs, CO, USA.

ptoa/, which literally means “to broadcast live, directly,” and is used to describe the broadcasting of a radio or television show.³⁶ Interestingly enough, radio ministry was one avenue in which Cambodian evangelical women had the opportunity to let their voices be heard, even if only briefly, or in a limited way. For example, a Cambodian woman, Miss Keam Ny, graduated from the Ta Khmau Bible School and relocated to Manila, Philippines, where she got married and became known thereafter as Mrs. Celso Sumido. While there, she worked for the Far East Broadcasting Company (FEBC), with which the CMA has collaborated in various locations over time. As “the Khmer language broadcaster,” her responsibilities included “editing programs and compiling some of her own, including a daily newscast.”³⁷ In a denominational report, CMA radio ministry leader Norman Ens indicates appreciation for the young woman’s contributions but also expresses preference for male leadership at the radio station. He writes:³⁸

We praise God for this provision. However, we are still praying for a young man to be sent to Manila for broadcasting and possible study at the Bible School there. Meanwhile, we are requesting that Mr. Lim Chhoeung, studying at Ebenezer Bible College record new messages either at the Zambowanga studio in Manila during vacation periods, for release on radio.

In other words, despite Sumido’s relative expertise as one who had completed her training at the denominational Bible School, Ens felt that the whole arrangement would be more appropriate if a man, with or without theological training, could be involved in this ministry. These reports have not provided extensive detail regarding the content of Sumido’s radio programming, although it is known that the following year, she continued “rearranging programs, adding some new music, some being her own singing, and having a live daily program called, ‘Songs in the Night’, as well

³⁶ SEAlang Library Khmer, Search Results, “psaay,” <http://www.sealang.net/khmer/dictionary.htm>. In this article, Khmer words appearing between two forward slashes are rendered phonetically according to the International Phonetic Alphabet (IPA), enabling readers to perform word searches on the Khmer-English dictionary available through the SEAlang Library, should they desire additional information concerning the words’ definitions and, where applicable, etymologies.

³⁷ Norman Ens, “Radio Ministry Report 1974,” 1, *Annual Report Khmer Republic 1974*, CMA National Archives, Colorado Springs, CO, USA.

³⁸ Ens, “Radio Ministry Report 1974,” 1, CMA National Archives, Colorado Springs, CO, USA.

as a brief daily world newscast.”³⁹ After the arrival of the anticipated Mr. and Mrs. Lim Chheong in May 1975, Ens describes the situation in rosier terms, saying:⁴⁰

With Mr. and Mrs. Lim Chheong there in Manila and Keam Ny assisting I believe that this medium-wave twice daily broadcasting into Cambodia will be of tremendous value both as a source of encouragement and development in the lives of the Christians as well as a wide-spread evangelistic tool[.]

Although Sumido *née* Ny had preceded the newly married couple at the radio station, she was considered upon their arrival to be the one “assisting” them, rather than vice versa. Despite this limitation, she had the opportunity, however briefly, to serve as “the only Cambodian working on radio programs in Manila.”⁴¹

In addition to the radio ministry, women worked in the Bible Correspondence Course Department of the Cambodian national branch of the CMA, which in 1975 was still financed by the American mission. Three women worked in this program: the department head, Mrs. Tien Soth, along with two graduates of the Ta Khmau Bible School—Miss Daly, who “corrected the more difficult lessons,” and Miss Therah, who responded to “lessons on John and Luke.”⁴² Unlike in the radio ministry scenario, there was no shortage of male service available to tend to the correspondence course. In fact, Mr. Trieu Saree is listed, only after the three women, as one who “[o]ccasionally” provided “[e]xtra [h]elp” in instances when “the lessons would pour in too quickly for this small staff to handle.”⁴³ In this case, wherein these women’s faces could not be seen, nor the timbres of their voices heard, Ens found it acceptable for women to offer instruction on matters pertaining to the Bible. The distance between those completing the lesson and those offering correction created an opportunity in which women’s ministerial skills could be appreciated.

³⁹ Ens, “Report of the Radio Ministry,” 1, *Report by Khmer Mission: Christian Missionary Alliance*, June 2, 1975, CMA National Archives, Colorado Springs, CO, USA.

⁴⁰ *Ibid.*, 2.

⁴¹ Ens, “Radio Ministry Report 1974,” 1, CMA National Archives, Colorado Springs, CO, USA.

⁴² Norman Ens, “Publications Department Report,” 2, *Report by Khmer Mission: Christian Missionary Alliance*, June 2, 1975, CMA National Archives, Colorado Springs, CO, USA.

⁴³ *Ibid.*

Resoluteness of Vocation: Cambodian Evangelical Women in Ministry Today

In each of the cases above, women leaders found ways to use their skills to contribute to the formation of evangelical Christianity in Cambodia, despite the limitations in place through the denomination. The same can be seen today in the lives of Cambodian evangelical women ministers. In this section, I will shine the spotlight on female leaders at three different non-denominational churches in Phnom Penh. For the sake of protecting my interlocutors' identities, I have assigned pseudonyms not only to them, but to their congregations, as well.

Jorani, the wife of Phnom Penh-based pastor named Samedy, prided herself on the authority she exercised as the highest shareholder at the Christian school where her sister-in-law served as principal. In their young adulthood, Jorani and Samedy had both attended a Bible college in Cambodia's capital city and later served in full-time ministry as leaders of Knowledge of Christ Church, whose congregation met in an elevated house in town. Jorani had encountered Christianity as a girl, when she and her family were living in a refugee camp in Thailand. Her mother had worked with the United Nations High Commission on Refugees (UNHCR) and encountered Christian missionaries during that time. After beginning to attend church, Jorani's mother invited her and Jorani's father to join her. After repatriating to Cambodia, Jorani's parents began working in Christian ministry, with her father serving as a pastor and her mother, as a leader in the church. When I asked Jorani if their congregation, Knowledge of Christ, believed that women could be pastors, Jorani replied, "We believe the Bible." Elaborating, she explained her own church's view that women could be "church leaders," but that it was better for men to be "pastors," because the Bible did not say that women could hold this office. In the spirit of openness, I shared my own perspective with Jorani, explaining that, while I also believed the Bible, I interpreted it differently and believed that women could be pastors, as well. I brought up Junia, heralded as one who stood out "among the apostles," as an example.⁴⁴ Jorani held her ground, saying nothing further on the topic of gender roles in ministry but continuing cordially in conversation despite our difference in opinion. Essentially, we had agreed to disagree.

Throughout my time in Cambodia, I visited Knowledge of Christ frequently and caught a glimpse of her role as a church leader. For example, she was responsible for leading a Bible study group that met in a family's home. The group began as a women's Bible study—and remained so, if only in name—but one woman brought her husband, and another woman, her brother. When I

⁴⁴ Rom. 16:7, New Revised Standard Version.

visited this study one night as the guest of another interlocutor, all of us who attended, male and female, sat together in a circle on the floor, helping ourselves to the oranges and mangoes that certain other Bible study participants had brought to share, and we listened to Jorani expound upon Luke’s account of the Lord’s Prayer. Jorani led the discussion with confident nonchalance, apparently unbothered at the idea of teaching a group that included men as well as women. Her status as a Bible college graduate, as the pastor’s wife, and as the partial owner of the school with which the church was associated, formed the basis of her qualifications as a church leader, as long as she did not claim the title of “pastor” and limited herself, at least officially, to the Christian education of women.

Like Jorani, Sokha had spent the early years of her life in Thailand before repatriating to Cambodia with her family in 1993. By the time I met her in the spring of 2019, Sokha was leading a non-profit organization that operated a dormitory for rural-based students attending schools in Phnom Penh. A small congregation, Life in the Spirit Church, met on the premises of her organization every Sunday morning. Some of the parishioners were students living in the dormitory. Sokha was not considered the pastor of the church but, nevertheless, acted as the primary gatekeeper for the community by virtue of her position as president of the church’s host organization, which I would discover when it was time to fill out paperwork for my Institutional Review Board (IRB). I had imagined I would need seek permission from the pastor to carry out interviews and participant-observation at the church, but I quickly learned that it was Sokha, and not the pastor, who held the authority to determine whether my project could be brought before the governing board and taken into consideration. Sokha, who took on a significant portion of the pastoral care-load within the congregation, took her role as shepherd and protector of the congregation quite seriously. Before offering her approval for me to visit the church, she and her assistant wanted to ensure that I would not take any photos of their parishioners, in order to maintain anonymity. I assured them that I would take no photos, which appeared to bring much relief. After reading my informed consent form, which others of my interlocutors had found unnecessarily formal, Sokha and her team delighted in the form’s thorough attention to ethical matters.

When I met with Sokha and Martine, a lay leader at Life in the Spirit Church, who was ethnically Vietnamese but who had spent most of her adult life in Cambodia, Martine expressed appreciation for the church’s openness to women in the pulpit. Sokha affirmed this assessment, explaining that women were generally permitted in Cambodia to be leaders in church, but that they sometimes were not allowed to preach. Sokha then clarified

that women at their church were indeed permitted to do so. “We used to have to have a lady pastor, but she passed away already,” Martine informed me. She also noted that, although Nimith, a man who worked with a Christian non-profit in the development sector, held the title of pastor at Life in the Spirit, nearly 90% of the parishioners were women. She opined that the church’s women possessed “more passion than the men.” Martine attributed the congregation’s dramatic gender discrepancy to the prominent role of women, suggesting that many men felt uncomfortable with the arrangement and preferred that the church be “more like other churches.” Although it was Nimith who preached during most of my visits to Life in the Spirit, I did attend one Sunday service on which occasion Sokha preached, with Proverbs 31 as her sermonic text. I greeted Sokha after the service and complimented her on the message. As she thanked me, she declared that she considered it a “blessing” of her church that women had the opportunity to preach.

Finally, at Descending Dove, a charismatic congregation planted by missionaries from the Philippines, I encountered Chaya, a young Khmer woman employed by the church but not listed as one of the pastors. Instead, she held the title of Missionary to University Students. Chaya regularly offered sermons on those Sundays when the lead pastor, a Khmer man who went by the English name Matt, was not preaching. The first time I heard Chaya preach, the sermon centered on Isaiah 53. Chaya lit upon verse 10, in which the author indicates that it was God’s will “to crush ... with pain” the suffering servant figuring into the text.⁴⁵ In the KSV rendering of Isaiah 53, from which Chaya preached, the term /klaoc psaa/—meaning, “to be seriously burned”⁴⁶—is employed to capture the essence of the painful suffering God designated the servant to endure. Chaya called out to the young women in the congregation regarding this point and asked rhetorically if they would still obey God, even if God were to lead them into a life with “no husband, no kids, and no money.” At this, her audience, comprising mostly adolescents and young adults,⁴⁷ erupted into

⁴⁵ Isa. 53:10, New Revised Standard Version. In the Khmer Standard Version translation of Isaiah 53, from which Chaya preached, the third person masculine pronoun is frequently replaced with the term /neak bāmraə/, meaning “servant” (literally, “servant person”). See SEALang Library Khmer, Search Results, “/neak/”; “/bāmraə/,” <http://www.sealang.net/khmer/dictionary.htm>.

⁴⁶ SEALang Library Khmer, Search Results, “klaoc psaa,” <http://www.sealang.net/khmer/dictionary.htm>.

⁴⁷ It is not unusual in Cambodia to find churches in which the majority of the congregation consists of youth. In 2015, almost two thirds of the Cambodian population was composed of individuals under thirty years of age. See United Nations Population Fund Cambodia, “Cambodia Youth Data Sheet

boisterous laughter. “It’s funny, but it’s true,” Chaya continued soberly, inviting her parishioners into a space of solemn reflection. “Would you be willing to obey?” Without crossing over into the territory of gender essentialism, I would venture to say that Chaya, in her role as missionary, brought to her sermons a perspective that particularly addressed the concerns of her female parishioners, even while preaching before a mixed audience.

Conclusion

Throughout the history of evangelicalism in Cambodia, women have persevered in ministry despite the barriers they encountered. Sometimes probing into potential options not yet available, at other times working within existing structures, they have found ways to allow their ministerial impact to be felt. Often, opportunities arose out of situations involving physical distance. Denominational leadership tended to allow women to participate in radio ministry and correspondence courses, where they did not see those whom they served, and they, in turn, were not seen. Today, digital media provides yet another way for Cambodian women to engage in acts of ministry, even across international boundaries. As charismatic forms of Christianity are on the rise in Cambodian communities, including transnationally around the world, the CMA’s pluriform emphases on the Bible merge and meld with spiritual practices that were not commonly touted in the early days of CMA ministry in Cambodia. As more women enter into officially recognized preaching spaces, their presence in such spaces as of now is not always well received. Even so, the Cambodian women who feel they have been called to preach—broadly defined—find ways to live into this calling, contributing to the formation of Cambodian transnational evangelicalism.

2015,” 25 February 2016, https://cambodia.unfpa.org/sites/default/files/pub-pdf/Flyer_Cambodia_Youth_Factsheet_final_draft_%28approved%29.pdf.

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